

Author Note: Hi! I'm Emma and I'm taking over this story. This is an original chapter, so not much to see really, if you've already read it. If you haven't, well, I hope you like it.

Petunia Dursley sat in her kitchen, staring out of a window, a cup of tea cooling in front of her. Something was bothering her, and now that her husband had left for work, and her son had gone out, she had a free moment to think without anyone disturbing her. She disliked thinking when she could be interrupted. Now, she had ample time.

Ever since the summer holiday had begun, she had noticed things. Odd things, but who knew with the way the boy was what they meant. Honestly, she had never been exactly kind to the boy before, and she didn't think that he would accept her now if she did, but something had to be done! She pulled out the letter that she had received from that mental headmaster of her nephew's school and glared at it. She had read it so many times that the creases were well-worn, and the ink had started to fade. She opened the page and stared at it.

Dear Mrs. Dursley,

I regret to inform you that Mr. Potter did not have an easy year this year. His grades are acceptable, no worries there. He did, however, come face to face with Voldemort yet again and he lost someone very dear to his heart. His godfather will live on in his memories and affections, I'm sure. Please try to allow him to grieve as he needs to, and make sure that he doesn't leave the house, as Voldemort had indeed grown in power and strength.

Yours,

Albus Dumbledore

What did he mean, that she should allow the boy to grieve? The boy wasn't grieving! He was killing himself slowly through means of apathy! Apathy about simple things like food, sleep, even hygiene. She re-folded the letter, grateful, not for the first time in her life that Albus Dumbledore wasn't in front of her at that moment. She had known that something like this would happen if she allowed her nephew to go to that school! She had known very well how meddling

that man could be. Hadn't he meddled with her own life when she was a child? She jumped when she heard screaming from the living room.

She ran into the room to find her nephew on the couch, fighting his way out of sleep. She went over and shook him, trying to help him wake up. His eyes snapped open and he sat up. "I'm sorry if I disturbed you, Aunt Petunia." He said, catching his breath. The two of them had an unspoken understanding. He could sleep during the day while Vernon and Dudley were away, and she would make sure that he woke up when he had nightmares.

"You didn't." She assured him. She pushed him back down onto the couch. "I'll wake you before Vernon gets home." She said. Harry nodded his thanks and she retreated to the kitchen. She pulled out a notepad and pen and started listing the things that she found wrong with her nephew. "Let's see: lack of interest in normal activities, change in sleeping habits, change in eating habits," she snorted. She was happy if she could get a few bites of food into him at a time. Sometimes, even that wouldn't stay in his stomach. "Nightmares, despondency, mood swings," Harry didn't necessarily have mood swings. He went for sadness, to apathy, and back again. Not much change, but it was there. Her thoughts drifted to the day he had come home from school.

Vernon had come in and immediately went to the living room, where he had promptly lost himself in his newspaper. Harry had come in, dragging his trunk. The boy had looked terrible. He was pale, and the circles under his eyes were very dark, as though he had not slept well in weeks. He seemed thinner. He held himself stiffly, as though he hurt somewhere and was trying very hard not to show it. That night at dinner, he ate only six bites, and quietly excused himself. Petunia heard the toilet flush just seconds later. He had not even come back downstairs.

She managed to sneak into his room that night, just to check on him. He had not unpacked his trunk. His clothes were hung up, that was sure, but nothing else. No pictures of his friends, none of his school books, or anything even remotely magical. Just the owl, who was staring at Petunia in a way that seemed to convey the feeling of "help

him!” to Petunia’s imagination. She had backed out of the room, quietly, and gone to bed with an odd feeling. She woke a few hours later to the sound of screams from her nephew’s room. She had told Vernon that she would deal with him. She had gone to his room and managed to wake him. What she had seen in those first few unguarded seconds had shaken her down to her core. Would Lily have allowed such a thing to happen to Petunia’s son? She doubted it. Now was the time to make sure that she would re-pay Lily’s kindness.

She looked up and saw that it was almost time for her to leave for the tea party her best friend Ophelia Ramsey was putting on that afternoon. She went to the living room and shook Harry awake. Haunted green eyes stared up at her. “I’m going down the street to the Ramseys. Perhaps you should go lie down upstairs?” Harry only nodded and went up the stairs slowly. Petunia frowned and sighed. Something would have to be done and soon.

“This whole thing turned out a disaster because the rest of them just had to carpool and then break down. I’m very sorry, Petunia.” Petunia just smiled.

“Don’t worry about it, Lia.” She helped to gather the tea cups and followed her friend into the kitchen. “We were able to have a private little gossip between the two of us.” Ophelia turned to stare at her friend. That tone meant something was wrong.

“What is it, Petunia? Something’s bothering you. I can tell.” Ophelia dumped the plates in the sink and stared Petunia down.

“It’s my nephew.” Petunia cracked. She laid her cups down into the soapy water and sighed.

“The delinquent?” Ophelia did not believe that the boy was a delinquent. Still, she had listened to Petunia’s husband. Path of least resistance.

“Harry’s not a delinquent. He goes to a school for the gifted. Vernon is just jealous that Dudley did not get in. I see that plain as day. That and I wouldn’t want Dudley to go there anyway.” Petunia fell silent.

“So, what’s bothering you about Harry?” Ophelia poured out two glasses of wine and handed one to Petunia.

“He’s changed so much!” Ophelia wanted to roll her eyes.

“Kids do that, Pet. It’s called growing up.” Petunia shook her head and took a swallow of wine.

“It’s not that. Something happened to him at that school, one I didn’t want him to attend. Same school my sister went to. I just knew something bad would happen! Now, he comes home, depressed, nightmares every night, not eating, and all I received from that barmy headmaster was a letter, telling me that Harry’s godfather had died and to allow Harry to grieve. Want to know the best part? Harry watched it happen! Watched a man he loved die in front of his eyes!” Ophelia sat back, astonished at the vehemence of the speech. Let it not be said that Petunia Dursley did not have feelings for her nephew.

“Did that headmaster tell me? No! I found out from Harry after he woke up from one of his nightmares. He doesn’t even know I know. He was so far into that dream that he wasn’t aware of his surroundings. He blames himself for that man’s death!” Petunia hid her face in her hands.

“Have some wine, Pet.” Ophelia said. “It’s obvious you want to help Harry. Can you tell me some more of his behavior?” Petunia picked up the glass and drained it. She pulled out a slip of paper and handed it to Ophelia. The woman drained her own wine and poured out some more. She read the list and sighed. “He’s obviously depressed. In need of some serious and intensive help.” Ophelia chewed on her lip. “Would you like me to ask my boss about some doctors?” She asked.

“Anything you can do will be wonderful.” Petunia answered. “I never really showed any affection for him before, but something is making him hurt terribly. I need to get him the help he needs.” She had known that Ophelia would be willing to help in this. Ophelia worked as a receptionist in a psychologist’s office. She would know people in spades that could potentially help Harry. Ophelia hugged her friend and smiled.

“Don’t worry, Pet. We’ll get him the help he needs. Even if I have to bully my husband to take the case!” Petunia smiled. Ophelia had been Ryan Ramsey’s receptionist for three years before the man had confessed his love for her, a love that took Ophelia by surprise.

“Why don’t you and Ryan come over tomorrow afternoon? I know he’s off, and he can see Harry for himself. The boy looks awful. Maybe with that image, he’ll work all the harder.” Petunia suggested.

“You know my husband too well, Petunia. That sounds great, but only if you make that cheesecake I adore so much.” Petunia nodded and left, happy that Ophelia was willing to help her scheme. Petunia returned home to find Harry asleep in his room. She tossed a blanket over him and went downstairs to the kitchen. She found a note on the table from Vernon, saying that he had taken Dudley out to dinner. She rolled her eyes and pulled out some ingredients. Her nephew was going to eat at least a full bowl and spend an hour in her presence before the night was up!

Petunia had just managed to get Harry to swallow a sleeping pill for the night. Thankfully, he was too far out of it from his nightmares to realize what his aunt had given him. Petunia watched him until the drug kicked in before returning downstairs to her husband and son. They had come in, both a little more than drunk, just an hour before. The first thing they both had wanted to do was torment Harry.

Petunia had taken wedding vows, vows she considered sacred, and she knew that obeying her husband was one of them. Deceiving her husband was not one of them. She had refused to let them up the stairs, saying that the boy was sick and most likely contagious, and would not for the world let her husband and son catch what he had. Needless to say, that was enough to confine them to the living room in front of the television for the rest of the night. The two had ended up asleep, most likely from too much alcohol.

She managed to try to make them a little more comfortable before leaving them to their slumber. If either of them complained of a stiff neck, she would tell them exactly why she had no sympathy for their pain. Honestly, Vernon taking Dudley drinking! She had no idea what

had come over the man, but she intended to let him know her feelings over the next few days. In the most loving way possible, of course. That was the only language to which Vernon responded well. She schemed a little more before going to her bed. Tomorrow, she hoped to find that Ryan and Ophelia would be able to help her find a way to help Harry.

Like? No Like? Please review and tell me what you think!

Author's Note: Here's the next chapter for you all. Sylvia and I are already working on the next chapter!

"Harry. Wake up now." Harry mumbled something and rolled over. Were all teenagers this hard to wake up? "Harry. Up." Harry's eyes finally opened, staring at her in their odd unfocused way before he pulled his glasses on.

"Aunt Petunia? Did I wake you?" He asked, reaching up a hand to rub his face.

"No. It's time you were up." Harry nodded and sat up before shaking his head as though to clear it. "Come on now." Petunia thanked whatever powers there were that Harry was still semi-drugged. It made him much easier to deal with. She pulled him to his feet and steered him across the hall to the bathroom. "You need a shower." She said, starting the water. "Come downstairs when you're done." Harry nodded and pulled off his shirt. She couldn't help it; she gasped. He didn't seem to notice. There was proof that he had lost some serious weight, and not just since he had come home from school.

Did those teachers at that infernal school take no notice of their students at all? Didn't someone notice that the boy was not eating? She left the bathroom and went down to the kitchen, where she started making a light breakfast for Harry. No wonder he didn't want to eat normal food. It probably upset his stomach a great deal. Hot cereal this morning, chicken rice soup for lunch, and steamed fish and a jacket potato for dinner. That child would not get through the day without three meals, and maybe even some tea! She dished up some cereal and put it in the microwave oven to keep warm. She heard Harry come down the stairs.

He looked a little more alert now that he had bathed. His hair had gotten a bit longer, making it seem less wild, thank goodness. Harry hovered in the doorway, looking unsure of what he was supposed to do. If this was how a sleeping pill affected him, she would only give him half from that day on. He was far too fuzzy-headed for her liking. "Come sit down, Harry." Harry did as he was told and sat at the table, resting his head on a hand. She pulled out the cereal and put it in

front of him. He made a face.

"I'm really not hungry, Aunt Petunia. Thank you for the thought." He said. She raised an eyebrow. Harry gaped at her for a moment.

"What was that look for?" She asked, truly interested. Harry shrugged.

"Nothing. You just looked like one of my professors for a second." He almost flinched, waiting to be berated for referring to his school. Petunia smirked a bit.

"Which one?" Harry looked up again before answering.

"Professor Snape, my Potions teacher. He likes his eyebrows, the overgrown bat." Petunia hid a laugh before returning to her ingredients. She heard Harry start to get up.

"You're not to move from that chair until you've eaten at least half of that, young man." She could almost feel the child freeze, gape, and then looked defeated as he sat back down. So many years of observing him had paid off. Harry picked up the spoon and started. Petunia smiled to herself and started on the cheesecake.

Soon after Harry had managed to eat half of his cereal, Petunia suggested he bring down some of his homework to the kitchen to work on. She didn't want to let him out of her sight for very long. He shrugged, saying that he didn't feel ready to start on it yet. Petunia didn't want to push it. "Have you written your letter to your friends?" Harry looked up and knew what she was talking about.

"I'll do it later." She only nodded and allowed him to continue sitting there. He seemed perfectly content to do so and he was in her sight. Nothing could have suited her better at that moment. "What are you making?" He asked after about an hour of silence.

"A cheesecake and some sandwiches for tea this afternoon. My friend Ophelia and her husband Ryan are coming over." Harry nodded and asked if he could help. "Are you feeling up to it?" She asked, eyeing him.

"I slept pretty well last night." He admitted. She motioned him over and showed him what to do with the vegetable tray. He worked in silence and she bubbled inside. He was at least willing to interact with her. He finished and then looked for direction.

"Into the refrigerator." She motioned. He picked it up and slid it inside. She heard the slot in the door open. "Could you get the mail?" Harry nodded and wandered out. When he didn't come back in five minutes, she went to check on him and found him sitting on the stairs, some letters in his lap, with one clutched in his hand. "Harry?" She lightly touched him on the arm. That seemed to break him out of it. "What is it?" He handed her the letter. She took it and stared down at the bright green ink.

Dear Harry,

I hope this letter finds you well and that you are comfortable for the moment. I

am sorry that I had to send this the Muggle way, but it had less chance of being

intercepted. We will be bringing you to Headquarters within the next two weeks.

Our informants have told us that Voldemort is actively pursuing you, and he has

less chance of finding you here than there. I'm sure the Dursleys will be thrilled.

Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley will also be here, as most of the Order, so you

will not want for companionship. Give my regards to your family.

Yours,

Albus Dumbledore

"I destroy his office and he acts like nothing happened!" Harry burst out. "He's ordering my life again!" Petunia noticed that this was more words put together at once than he had attempted all summer. "He'll probably do it on my birthday as some kind of twisted present." At that, he fell silent, fuming and raging at Dumbledore only inside his head.

"Who says you're going?" Petunia asked. Harry blinked and looked up.

"What?" He asked. A little slow on the uptake, today. Definitely only half a sleeping pill in the future.

"Who says you're going? I'm still your guardian, and he can't fight the law." Harry smirked at her, looking far too old for his years.

"Dumbledore is above the law. Didn't you know that?" Petunia frowned.

"If that man, or anyone connected to him, so much as lays a finger on this house without my permission, he or she will find out exactly why it is not wise to tamper with Petunia Dursley." Harry sat back a little. Where in the world had that come from? Neglect and dislike for years, and now this? He shook his head, wondering if he were dreaming.

"May I go lay down? I'm not feeling so hot all of a sudden." Petunia nodded and pointed towards the living room. Harry didn't care where, so long as he was horizontal. He found the sofa, which had become a trusted friend in the weeks he had been home, and curled up. Perhaps the world would make a little more sense after some sleep.

She woke Harry for lunch, and allowed him to go back to sleep until tea time. She managed to run a comb through his hair while he was still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "Perhaps we should let your hair grow out a little. It's less wild this way." Harry only nodded, not really agreeing with her, but just doing something automatically in answer, the way he had done in his last days at Hogwarts before summer break. She frowned a bit and had him help carry in the tea tray and plates. "Stay here for tea. You need to be awake for a while,

or you won't sleep tonight." Harry nodded again and took a seat in a chair. She ran to the door when the doorbell sounded.

"Pet, darling, it's been too long!" Ophelia gasped from the doorway. Her husband rolled his eyes at his wife's antics.

"It was only yesterday!" Petunia assured her, returning her hug.

"Exactly! It was too long!" Petunia shook her head and shook Ryan's hand as Ophelia let go of her. "Ryan, you remember Petunia?" She asked.

"I think I do. You only mention her every other minute or so." He returned, causing a playful slap from his wife. Petunia smiled and gestured towards the living room. "Your nephew in there?" Ryan asked in a whisper. Petunia nodded and Ryan went in with a smile on his face.

"Oh, my goodness, Ryan! How he's grown!" Petunia heard as she followed the couple into the living room. Harry looked stunned for a minute before jumping to his feet and offering his hand. "I can't believe that this is that little mite who used to run all over the neighborhood!" Harry thought about telling her why he had run all over the neighborhood, but restrained himself.

"Calm down, Lia! Don't startle the kid too much!" Ryan gave him an easy-going smile and introduced himself. "Sorry about my wife, Harry, but she can be a little enthusiastic sometimes. I doubt you remember us at all." Harry sat back down.

"I remember you. You live just the next street over, in a white house with hedges." He had used those hedges to hide many times, and the couple never seemed to mind. Petunia dished out and the adults started talking, while Harry nursed his cup of tea, hoping that Aunt Petunia's glare meant that he only had to drink some of it, and not all of it. His stomach was too full for anything else. Merlin, he hoped she wouldn't expect him to eat anything! He'd never manage!

"Harry?" He looked up, expecting to see Aunt Petunia offering something to eat. "Why don't you go lie down upstairs? You are

looking a little off." Harry nodded, grateful for being banished to his room. Being horizontal again sounded like an important idea just at that moment. Petunia waited until she heard the door shut. "Give him twenty minutes to half an hour, and he'll have a nightmare." She said. Ryan nodded and took out a notebook, following Ophelia and Petunia into the kitchen.

"Perhaps you can answer some questions for me?" Petunia nodded. "How long has he been acting this way?"

"Three weeks. Ever since he came home from school." Ryan nodded and wrote that down. What followed was a fifteen minute session of questioning.

"Now, how did he act at school, specifically in the last few weeks of school, since his godfather's death?" Petunia was at a loss. She had no idea. "What about one of his classmates?" Ryan suggested. Petunia thought of the only one who would have a telephone.

"If you would excuse me, I might be able to call someone that would know. I think I have her number." Petunia flipped through the address book and found the Granger's number. She was sure that the girl would be willing to talk to her. She dialed and waited until someone picked up. "May I speak to Hermione Granger, please?" She asked.

"This is she." A puzzled voice said on the other end.

"Miss Granger, this is Petunia Dursley, Harry's aunt." A slight gasp was heard, but she ignored it. "I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for me? About Harry?" Hermione blinked. The Twilight Zone had come and swallowed her. There was no other explanation.

"Of course, Mrs. Dursley." The questions asked were amazing, from what his sleeping habits had been like in those last few weeks, to how much he ate at each meal, to which teacher he trusted the most, and which one always had his interests at heart. Hermione answered truthfully, wondering where all this was leading. Petunia seemed to pause after each one, as though relaying the information.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. You've been very helpful." Petunia said, preparing to hang up with the girl.

"Mrs. Dursley, this is to help Harry, right?" Petunia paused. "I know that he isn't handling anything well, and it seemed like I was the only one who noticed that Harry was hurting. You are going to help Harry?" Petunia sighed silently.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I am. Please, do not mention this conversation, or what you know, to anyone. I don't want Professor Dumbledore to find out. Harry seems a bit upset with him, and I don't want that man around him right now." Hermione gave out a sharp laugh.

"I understand completely, Mrs. Dursley. Please call me Hermione. And, if I may take the liberty, Professor Snape, for all of his apparent animosity towards Harry, seems intent on making sure that Harry survives to his twenties, at the least. If you need a professor in on this who won't give the secret away, trust him. Just don't tell him I told you! He'd fail me!" Petunia assured the girl that her secret would never be told, thanked her again, and hung up. Ryan was standing there, looking very grave. He opened his mouth to say something, but it died when a scream came from upstairs. Petunia ran up the stairs, followed closely by Ryan and Ophelia.

"Sirius!" Petunia slapped the door open and went to her nephew, trying to shake him awake. "Sirius!" Harry continued to thrash until Petunia pulled him into her arms. He calmed a little and mumbled something before falling back asleep.

She motioned Ophelia and Ryan out of the room and back downstairs. "That was one of his calmer ones." She told them.

"What did he mumble before falling asleep?" Ophelia asked.

"All my fault." Petunia answered. Ryan tossed his pen on the table and scowled.

"No one at his school noticed this behavior?" He demanded. "No one at all?" Petunia shook her head sadly.

"Both of his parents went to that school. The teachers view Harry in the light of his parents, and not as Harry." Petunia figured that that was as close to the truth that she would allow herself.

"Well, that dream of his clenches my decision. I demand that the child seek immediate, and hopefully, around the clock help. I won't lie, Petunia. You are close to losing that child. Another week or two of this, and I wouldn't be surprised to see him suicidal, if he isn't already." Petunia noticed that when Ryan was angry, he looked very much like an animal on the prowl. She wondered what would happen if she introduced him to Professor Dumbledore and Voldemort. She had a feeling that Ryan would be the only one left.

"I doubt Vernon would be willing to pay..." Ryan cut her off and pulled out a pamphlet.

"This is a new facility. I just received information about this place late last week. I thought of it when Ophelia told me about Harry last night. It's run by a board of very wealthy, very philanthropic, trustees. It's set up like a boarding school, so there are lessons for the kids, the teachers, support staff, even the cooks, know a thing or two about helping kids with problems. It's structured so that the student is able to determine their own speed. They get classes in early morning, one-on-one therapy after classes, and after lunch is another round of classes, and then a group therapy session. The evening is reserved for all types of clubs. I highly suggest you enroll Harry immediately, this afternoon, if possible." Ryan told her. Petunia looked through the brochure.

"Is there a catch?" She asked. Ryan shrugged before taking out a small pad and scribbling on it.

"Only one. A doctor must prescribe the place." He tore off a sheet and Petunia saw that it was a sheet from a prescription pad. "Please, Petunia. Do this for him." Ryan pleaded.

"He'll be there tomorrow." She answered. Ryan gave a deep sigh and almost got on her knees to thank her.

Petunia read through the pamphlet and saw that the school provided everything for new students, even uniforms. The only thing required of families were visits to the students, at least one every two weeks, and meeting with teachers and doctors during those visits. She felt that she could handle that. She made a mental note to remind Harry to write his letter so that his friends wouldn't bang on the door the next day and started dinner. First thing in the morning, she and Harry would start off for St. Jude's Academy.

To all you wonderful people who reviewed: Thank you!

"Welcome back, Harry." Voldemort said as Harry felt himself lowered to the ground. "How are things with the Muggles?" Harry tried to roll away from the man, but Voldemort reached out a hand and stopped him. "Take it easy, Harry." Voldemort waved his wand and a bed appeared. Voldemort gestured Harry towards the bed with his wand and Harry felt himself lifted and placed on the pulled back blankets. "There you go. You look much more comfortable now." Voldemort settled the blankets over Harry and sat down next to the bed. "You look so tired." Voldemort told him.

Harry sat up and glared at him. "That's your fault, not mine." Voldemort pushed him back into the pillows and smiled at him. Harry grimaced as he tried to fight his way up again and failed against Voldemort's hands.

"It is your fault. Once you agree to be mine, this will all end, and you will find out what true respect is like. All of my Death Eaters would respect power like yours and would answer to you." Voldemort stood and went over to the conjured fireplace and stood there, staring at the flames. "I could help you to become so much more than what you could become with Dumbledore." Voldemort said to Harry as he stared into the fire. "Can you just imagine how much we could do together?"

Voldemort's faded away in a flurry of curses as another voice broke through the dream.

"Harry, up!" Petunia called from his doorway. She could tell from his eyes that he had not slept well. They were bloodshot and looked haunted. He nodded from his bed and sat up, moving slowly, but still moving. Now all she had to do would be get him in the car, tell the wizard that she knew was outside that she was taking Harry out for a while, and that they would be back. They couldn't keep her from taking her nephew out at all. He was safest when he was with her, after all. The closer the better. The two of them would be spending a four hour car trip together. He'd never be safer. As to that evil wizard finding them, if he could keep up with her driving, she would congratulate him. She returned to the kitchen and spooned some cereal out for Harry. Ten minutes later found the boy drifting to the table and sitting down, not really awake at all.

“Harry.” Harry opened his eyes to see his aunt standing there, looking a little grim. “Let’s go.” Harry nodded, thinking that they were home, and sorry to have missed a little change of scenery. He was shocked to find that they were in a parking lot outside a huge building. He shrugged and followed her into across the lot and into the building, wondering why she was carrying a small duffle bag. Once inside the building, Harry lingered near the doorway while his aunt checked in with a receptionist. The lady behind the desk motioned towards a sitting room. Petunia gestured for Harry to follow her. Harry shrugged to himself and followed. There was a large blue couch in the room, surrounded by several different kinds of chairs, coffee tables, and odd little end tables that didn’t quite fit into the scheme. He made a beeline for the couch and claimed it. Petunia chose a chair.

“Aunt Petunia? Why are we here?” Harry asked, unable to close his eyes.

“I don’t like magic, or the ways of wizards. I’ve made that no secret. Vernon and I had a feeling of what would happen if you were exposed to it. We tried our best to keep you from it, that unnaturalness.” Harry glared at her. “We tried our best, and it wasn’t good enough. Off you went, only eleven years old, to a world you didn’t understand and no one in our family could possibly explain.” She stopped, not sure of what to say next.

“You kept the knowledge of what I am...”

“For your safety!” She shrieked. “We knew! That headmaster of yours told us what would happen when it was time for you to go to school. We knew that you would be in constant danger from the minute you knew about it. Constant danger! We thought it better that you would have no knowledge of it, and then, once you were situated in Stonewall High, that Vernon and I could start showing how proud we were of you, without that magic Dumbledore said you would have.” Harry sat, shocked. His guardians had been willing to tell him that they were proud? That didn’t quite fit with the Vernon and Petunia Dursley he knew. “We thought that if you did well enough at Stonewall, and then happened to find out about magic, you wouldn’t care because your life would be established. We hadn’t counted on

Dumbledore's interference. He insisted, and you went off at eleven years of age!" She stood up and went to look out the window.

"You fought against a troll your first year! Not even three months into the school year, and your life had been in danger! Now, you tell me, how was I supposed to react? I know very little about that world of yours, but I do know that trolls are dangerous, and full grown men would not take one on alone. And yet, you and your friends managed to do so. Then, Dumbledore allowed you to challenge a possessed teacher. The man is insane. Let's send in a child!" She huffed and stared out the window. "You fought against a basilisk! With a sword. If it had not been for that bird, you would have died!"

"You knew?" Harry asked.

"Of course we knew! Every time that, that, MAN sent us a letter, I was sure that it was announcing your oh-so-unfortunate death!" She said in a fierce whisper. "He would always tell us what you managed to accomplish, never mind the odds against you, and how proud we should be of you." She shook her head. "I don't think you realized how he was preparing you for something. You've almost died so many times that I'm afraid that I have lost count. No one who has raised a child from one year old should have to count how many times that that child has been in danger." Harry took a few deep breaths to calm himself. What in the world was happening to his tidy little world? Aunt Petunia had sent out bomber planes to shatter it.

"Harry, what your uncle and I did may have been wrong, but we did what we thought was best. You've come home, every summer, just covered in glory from that school. It has been sink or swim for you from day one, and now, something has happened that has dragged you under, and you're drowning because of it. I refuse to let you drown completely." Harry figured that that was as close to an apology that he would ever get. "You are here to get some help, and you'll stay here until you get it."

"Aunt Petunia, it's not that I don't appreciate the gesture, you trying to make sure that I'm okay and all, but I'm fine. Besides, Dumbledore won't let me stay here. He'll find me and take me back to Hogwarts." Petunia frowned.

"Dumbledore won't be able to find you. And you are staying. I am admitting you here. This place specializes in children who need some help, and you are staying." Petunia regarded the rather shell-shocked face he gave her. "Now, about those letters, do you have any written?"

"Er, I did the whole summer supply." At her look, he just ducked his head. "I couldn't sleep one night." Petunia nodded. Well, that worked. Dumbledore wouldn't suspect a thing as long as Harry's letters continued arriving. "I can't stay here, Aunt Petunia. I've got to go back." Petunia's mouth pursed even more if possible. A male nurse came in, holding something in his hand. Harry wondered what it was.

"Hey, kid. My name's Jack. I'll be taking care of you for the next hour or so, until we get you settled. Your aunt here says that you'll be going under an alias for privacy reasons. You like spy movies or something?" Harry turned to his aunt and gaped at her. Jack took hold of his arm and fixed a hospital bracelet around his wrist.

"Aunt Petunia, please!" Petunia only shook her head.

"For once, I'm going to do what you need when you need it, and you need this. Listen to your doctors and nurses. I'll see you soon." She gave him an awkward one-armed hug and handed the duffel bag to Jack. She turned and without a backward glance, walked out of the room. Harry could not believe what his aunt had just done. She had put him in a mental institution! More than that, he couldn't leave. He pulled at his collar, suddenly unable to get enough air.

"Breathe, Evan!" Jack said next to him. Harry sank down on the couch and tried to suck in air. "Slowly!" Harry looked up at him, not hearing what the man was saying. He wondered why he couldn't stop shaking. Jack sat down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Listen to me, Evan. You need to calm down. Take a deep breath." Harry heard it a few times before actually listening. He sucked in a huge amount of air. "Hold it." Harry did as he was told, now officially on auto pilot. "Good. Now let it out." Harry did so. He idly wondered how many kids had flipped out on this guy when they were abandoned here. "Feeling better?" Harry looked up and nodded. He

could at least breathe. "Good. I know it's rough, but trust me, it gets easier." Harry just stared at him. "Let's go, Evan. We'll get you a room and into uniform, and then you can meet some of the other kids and your teachers. Your doctor will be along to see you later this afternoon."

Harry followed behind the man. First chance he got, he would write to Hermione and tell her that he was in some mental institution, and to send the Order. He was sure that she would come to his rescue herself, if no one else was available. He looked down at his bracelet and saw his alias. Evan James. What a nondescript name. His aunt should look into espionage. She would make a great agent. He looked around. This hospital didn't look like a hospital at all. It looked like a school. Jack had said teachers, and he had mentioned a uniform. Where on earth was he, and why did it feel like an alternate dimension?

"Hi, Jack!" A woman said. "This is Evan." The newly-named Evan looked up to see the woman. She seemed nice and gave him a wide smile.

"Yeah, this is double O 7 himself! Hey Evan, you mind if I call you Bond?" If his earlier talk with his aunt had not been evidence of his falling into an alternate dimension, this was proof enough. "Aw, you're still a little shocked. Just remember to breathe." Harry nodded slightly, still looking around like he couldn't quite believe what was going on around him. "Agent Bond, this is Cathy. She's in charge of the storage rooms." Harry shook her hand, nodding to her. Jack, odd nurse with a fondness for nicknames. Cathy, wide smile and in charge of storage. Check. He wondered what was next in this strange universe. Cathy brought out a rather large box and started to hand it to Harry. Jack intercepted it.

"Cathy, that'll break 007 into a million pieces! Can't you see he's kind of a runt?" He asked. He settled the box into his arms and nodded to Harry. "Let's go, Secret Agent." Three nicknames in one day. Did the man ever stop? Harry followed along behind him, looking for an exit. There was no way he could stay here with this barmy man and his nicknames! Unfortunately, none seemed to exist. "Elevator. No

climbing in the shafts today.” The man seemed apologetic. Whatever for? Harry rode the elevator up to the third floor.

“Welcome to third floor left! This is going to be your floor. In case you should lose yourself on a secret mission, it’s marked on your bracelet.” Harry looked down and saw the number three, followed by the letter “L”. He wondered why in the world his aunt thought he needed help. This man seemed to need it more than he did! He didn’t seem to be able to distinguish between reality and fantasy.

“Um, Jack?” Jack looked down, ecstatic to receive some speech from Harry. “You do know that I’m not really a secret agent, right?” He asked. If Jack said that he was, Harry would hunt down the nearest doctor.

“Of course I do. Every kid I take care of gets a nickname. 007 fits you, so you’re stuck with it until you leave.” Jack smiled. “You could have been stuck with a worse one, believe me!” Jack started towards a door when the door opened.

“Jack!” A boy said happily, coming up to the pair. “You didn’t tell me you’d be on the floor today.” He said, almost accusingly.

“I’m not. Just bringing a new one up to get him settled. His name is Evan James. Evan, this is Nathan. He’s one of the students here. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to let Nathan help you settle in, 007?” Harry shrugged. The nickname was back. “Good!” Jack handed Nathan the box. “You show 007 around, understand Bug?” Nathan snapped a salute, which Jack returned. Jack left the two boys and returned to the elevator.

“Bug?” Harry asked. “Bug” grimaced, smiled, and shrugged.

“I want to study bugs when I get older.” He said. “Jack found out within the first hour or so, and I’ve been Bug ever since.” Bug took the box and turned. “Your room is this way.” Evan followed him down the hall and to a door. On the door was the name “Evan James” in big bright construction paper letters. Bug opened the door and lead the way in. It was a private room. Only one bed.

“It’s almost time for lunch, so you’ll want to get changed now.” Bug dug through the box and pulled out an outfit identical to the one he was wearing. “I’ll wait outside.” Evan nodded and changed as soon as the door shut. He would stay here tonight, write the letter tomorrow, and be gone two days after that. He took the shoelace from one of his shoes and tied his wand to his leg. No way was he going to part from it now! He placed his regular clothing on the bed and opened the door. “Great! Let’s go. I’ll give you a tour before lunch starts. You’re lucky you came today, no classes!” In Harry’s opinion, Bug was far too happy to be in this place.

“Er, Nathan? Can I ask a question?” Harry asked quietly.

“Sure, go for it.”

Evan took a deep breath. “Don’t you hate it here?”

To his surprise, Nathan smiled. “Used to. The first whole month, actually. I hated everything. But now, I kind of like it here. No pressure to be more than who you are. No expectations. Just you. That’s all they want here. Just for you to be you. I’m not saying it was easy. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, talking about why I couldn’t sleep, or why I hated everyone. But, it’s the best thing that could have happened. You already hate it here?” Harry wondered how much he could tell him.

“My aunt just left me here.” Harry told him.

Nathan nodded. “The doctors came and got me from school. That wasn’t pretty.” Harry followed Nathan around, learning the layout of the building and the rules. There were a few rules, not many, but the ones they had were unbreakable. Like leaving school grounds. Not allowed. Or skipping meals. Not allowed. Missing class or therapy. Not allowed. They were easier than the rules that Dumbledore had mentioned, for “his safety”. “I smell hamburgers!” Nathan said, a little too happy for Harry’s taste. “They make the best hamburgers here. Come on! I’ll introduce you to our whole floor. We sit together at every meal.” Nathan practically latched onto Evan and dragged him towards a table. Calls of “Bug!” started the minute he got close.

“Hey, guys! This is Evan. He’s new.” Nathan went around the circle, naming each boy and Harry knew that he would not be able to duplicate the names. “His nickname’s 007! Jack’s already got to him.” Harry was pointed a chair, while two boys got up and went towards a door. One came back carrying hamburgers, while the other came back carrying a bowl of vegetables.

“Hey, Sparky. You have to eat a whole hamburger before you get any of these vegetables.” Sparky, a rather thin boy, looked crestfallen at the announcement. Bug leaned over and whispered to Harry.

“He’s got an eating disorder. Thinks he’s fat. We all watch him eat, just to make sure he’s actually eating. He’s been really sick lately from not eating right. We never used to watch. He said that it made him nervous. Now, we watch.” Harry nodded. Bug leaned over and pulled the bowl of vegetables towards him. “Hope you’re hungry, Evan.” Bug landed a huge spoonful of mixed vegetables on Harry’s plate. Harry fought down the feeling of nausea. Oh, he knew that he only had apple juice on his stomach, but he didn’t want anything else there, and didn’t think he could keep it there. He looked around, slightly panicked. Would they make him eat?

“What’s wrong, Evan? You don’t look too good.” One boy questioned. Even Sparky looked concerned.

“I haven’t been able to keep down much.” He answered. “I don’t think I can manage all this food.”

Nathan eyed him. “Just eat what you can. I’m sure the doctors will go easy on you today. If you tell them, they might even give you something for it.” Harry wanted no part in any medication at that point.

“How come he doesn’t have to eat and I do?” Sparky whined.

“You never eat. 007 here is scrawny, but he’s not a stick like you.” Some boy answered.

“I’m too big to be a stick!” Sparky returned.

"You're a stick!" Harry thought this a bit cruel. Nathan leaned over again.

"We figure that telling him how we view him will help in the long run. We're not teasing; we're telling the truth." Harry nodded and took a sip of water. He tried some vegetables, and found that his stomach liked them. A glass of water and full serving of vegetables later found Harry in line with the others to stack up their dishes. A man in dress pants and shirt came over.

"Evan James?" Harry looked up. "Come with me, please." Harry shrugged and handed off his dishes. He supposed that this man was a doctor, or one of those teachers Jack mentioned. He would soon find out.

Author's Note: Thanks for reviewing! Another two chapters, and then something fun! I'm having a blast with this. Hope you all enjoy!

Harry followed the man into an office and was motioned to a couch. He took a seat and looked around. It was not very big, but it was comfortable. It had a couch with deep green upholstery and throw pillows. Two armchairs were to his left, and a desk and chair were to his right. There were pictures scattered on the wall, both paintings and photographs. The photographs were mostly the man with kids around his age, all grinning or making faces at the camera. Harry idly wondered if it had something to do with the water.

"Let me introduce myself, Harry. My name is Paul Lauter and I'm going to be your therapist while you're here at St. Jude's. Any questions?" Harry looked at him and nodded.

"The nurse, Jack, said that I'm to have an alias, and you're calling me by my name. Why?" Paul smiled a bit.

"When your aunt first contacted us, she told us that your headmaster at your school was a little too involved in your private life. The alias is to protect your identity, so even if someone does talk about you outside these walls, they'll talk about Evan James, not Harry Potter." Harry nodded and looked around. Some of those kids were way too happy. "Anything else you would like to know?" Paul looked at Harry, noticing how he was sitting, and knowing that something was obviously bothering him.

"Not really. I'm not staying here long." Harry answered. Paul nodded.

"Why don't you ask, just in case?" Harry knew that he wasn't staying long, so why couldn't this man leave him alone and let him sleep on this very soft and oddly comfortable couch? Harry sighed and decided to humor the man for now.

"One of the boys on my floor mentioned classes." He said. Paul nodded again. Harry waited for further explanation, but the doctor just sat there. Harry frowned. "What did he mean by classes?" He asked.

"This is a school, as well as a treatment facility. We don't want anyone falling behind on their studies while they are here." Paul told him. Harry nodded. Well, good thing he wasn't staying then. "Anything else you want to know?" Paul moved forward in his chair a bit, as though anticipating an answer. Harry shook his head. "No?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Should I have more questions?" He asked. Paul sat back and regarded Harry.

"No, everyone is different." Paul answered. "So, what would you like to do?" Harry looked around.

"What am I supposed to do?" He asked. Paul made a quick note and shrugged.

"We can do whatever you want. We can talk, play a game, take a walk. It's up to you." Harry again felt like he was off center. Nothing made sense here. Nothing at all. Paul hadn't asked any questions about him or his family, what his school was like, nothing. Harry's perception of what a psychology appointment was had just been turned on its side.

"You pick." Harry said. Paul made another note and sat back.

"Do you play chess?" Paul asked.

"Yeah, but I'm not very good. Ron's better." Harry answered.

"Who's Ron?" Paul asked as he pulled out a chess board and a box. He held out the box and Harry picked out a piece. He would be black.

"My best friend at school." Harry answered. "He always beats me at chess. He beats everyone, for that matter." Harry told him, setting up his pieces. He looked at the knight and smiled a bit. Things had been so simple their first year. Everything was so complicated now.

"Sounds like one of my friends when I was your age. His name was John. Could beat anyone with his eyes closed." Harry paused in placing a piece.

"How'd he do that?" He asked.

"It's an expression, Harry." Paul said. Why did this kid not know a normal expression? "It means it was really easy for him."

"I knew that. I just thought you were serious." Harry mumbled. He had been too long out of the Muggle world. That was for sure. No wonder Paul stared at him. Just like everyone else.

"So, you and Ron play chess a lot. Any other games?" Harry wondered if dueling counted.

"Snap." Harry answered. Paul repressed a frustrated sigh. This kid was so closed off! He couldn't get any answers out of him. Not one hint of what was bothering him. Well, it was a challenge, and Paul would rise to the challenge.

"Ron's not your only friend?" He asked, moving his own piece. This kid was good. Not great, but good.

"No, there's Hermione." Paul looked up. Hermione? A girlfriend?

"Your girlfriend?" Paul asked. Harry's reaction was enough to tell him that she was wrong. His head snapped up and he looked really confused.

"Er, no. Not girlfriend. Mate, really. She makes sure that Ron and I don't get into too much trouble." Ah, information!

"You and Ron get into trouble at school?" Paul asked. Harry shrugged. "What do you do?"

"Nothing really. It was an expression." Harry didn't meet his eyes. There was something there. He was hiding something.

"Oh. So what do you and Hermione do?" Harry shrugged again.

“Not much. We play snap and chess, and she makes sure that Ron and I study. She’s brilliant. Really clever.” Paul nodded and made a note. Harry noticed but didn’t say anything.

They played in silence for a few minutes. “Any other friends?” Harry shrugged. Paul hated that response. He would need to stop that in the near future, after he had gotten to know Harry a little better.

“What’s your headmaster like? Your aunt mentioned that he was a fairly active part of your life.” Harry shrugged again.

“Meddling old coot who doesn’t know when to tell someone something.” Harry mumbled. Paul’s hand hovered over his chess piece.

“Pardon?” he asked.

“Nothing.” He frowned. There was something major there, and Harry had been about to let it out. He could tell from the boy’s face that he was upset about the headmaster. Paul blinked in astonishment as Harry’s face changed from that of a stormy teenager to a mask of affable kid. That disturbed him. The fact that Harry had such control of his emotions at such a young age was unsettling. Where had he learned to hide his emotions? What’s more, why would he need to, and from whom?

Harry reached out and moved a chess piece, thanking Professor Snape mentally for the first time in his life. He had just cleared away all emotion that the thought of the headmaster had caused. He thought that it might be a nice idea to drop the professor a line that read thanks so much for teaching me how to clear my mind. Helped keep the weird psychologist away from it. Harry could only imagine the man’s look on receiving that note. He decided that it wouldn’t do to send it. Professor Snape might actually consider killing him at that point.

“Do you like your headmaster, Harry?” Harry shrugged again.

“He’s okay. You know, like a headmaster.” Yeah, right. And Paul was the President of the United States of America. Paul made a quick

note and returned to the chess game. There was something there about that headmaster. He made a mental note to bring that up whenever possible. Sooner or later, he would catch Harry off guard.

“What’s your favorite sport?” Paul asked. “Assuming you have one.” Harry shrugged again. Paul let it go. He had to get the kid comfortable before anything real could take place.

“Do you have a favorite sport?” Harry asked, moving one of his chess pieces and gesturing for Paul to move.

“I like football. I used to play it when I was in school, but gave it up a few years back. I just couldn’t see myself doing just that for the rest of my life.” Harry nodded as though he understood and smiled when Paul moved. “Oh, no! Not my knight!” Paul could have sworn that Harry had almost smiled. Now, if he could just weasel a full smile out of the kid, his day would have been complete. “You’re an assassin! You just plucked him off!” Paul knew that he had said something that had upset Harry in just the second after his comment. Harry’s body re-defined the word “tense”. Paul took the chess piece from Harry’s hand and set it down. “Harry, what did I say to upset you?” Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, the mask was back on his face.

“Nothing.” Harry answered. “Are we done?” Paul looked at the clock.

“No. We still have another twenty minutes.” Harry glared at the clock. “Harry, people just don’t freeze over nothing. What did I say that freaked you out?” Paul coaxed. This kid obviously had had practice at beating concerned listeners away with a stick.

“Nothing. I’m just not used to hearing myself being referred to as an assassin.” It had been right there! Paul had almost had an answer! He wanted to scream in frustration, throw something, or just sit on Harry until the boy told him what the problem was. None of those techniques would work. He would need tons of patience with this kid. Some trust exercises would not go amiss, either. They were going to have to do something drastic to help him. There was no way around it. Perhaps a ropes course? Paul knew that heavy duty trust exercises would have to be involved. Harry was way too closed off for normal

methods. Whatever the breaking point, it was going to involve some high emotions before Harry would open up. Paul hated doing such things to the kids, but if it helped. He still hated the manipulation of it all.

"Well, Harry. Our time's done for today. You'll have classes first thing tomorrow morning at eight. You and I get to meet everyday, at eleven in the morning, so don't forget that. Right after classes end. After lunch, you get another round of classes, and group therapy starts at four. Dinner's at five-thirty, and clubs start meeting at seven. You'll have your pick of them, so long as you don't have any food issues that exercise or other activities might influence." Harry nodded at the explanation. "Any questions?"

"Am I allowed to write letters to my friends?" Paul smiled.

"Of course you are! We're not a prison here!" Harry looked at the hospital bracelet and smirked. Paul rolled his eyes. "I'm guessing that you don't like doctors." Paul said with a small smile.

"Way too much time in the hospital wing." Harry said. He stood and thanked Paul. "Where do I go now?" A knock on the door interrupted Paul's answer.

"Come in!" A head poked its way into the room through the doorway. "Hi, Skyla!" Paul said, standing and motioning the woman into the room. Harry privately thought that she looked like Fleur Delacour. "Evan, this is Skyla. She's going to be your tutor while you're here."

"Pleased to meet you, Evan. More pleased to be your teacher. I'm sure you are very studious and can't wait to get started. I've read your file and saw that you attend a special gifted school. I know the way that some gifted schools teach, and I'm sure that you and I can find your particular level of learning and get you started off on the right foot!" Harry could not believe the amount of chatter that this woman used when speaking! All Harry could think was that Hermione would absolutely adore this woman and her blatant love for learning and studying.

“Now, I know that it’s no fun at all to take a bunch of tests your first day here, but we have to know how many classes you can jump into right away, and whether or not you will need some extra instruction.” Skyla explained as she lead Harry into a rather gaudy classroom filled with things that Harry had not thought could belong to a classroom. Beanbag chairs, for instance. Or a video game system. Skyla motioned Harry towards a seat and pulled out a few packets of paper. “Just do what you can. When you can’t do anymore, just hand them over to me.” Harry nodded and plucked a strangely-shaped pencil from the cup on the desk, grimaced, and hunted for a plain one. He found a trusty yellow pencil and started on the first packet. Well, he at least remembered how to add and subtract!

Two hours later, a thoroughly disgusted Harry Potter finished the last packet and sighed. He could he have forgotten absolutely everything he had learned in primary school? He was sure that he must have learned most of that in the younger grades, but something had made him forget. It must have been time. Time always did things like that. “You can look at the books or find yourself a game to play with while I’m grading these, Evan.” Harry looked around, not really interested in anything yet.

“May I write a letter to my friend?” He asked politely.

“Of course you can! Help yourself to any of the supplies you might need. Envelopes are in the third drawer down over there. If you don’t have any stamps, just ask me. I’ve been a letter carrier for a lot of kids here before.” Harry nodded and thanked her before finding a pen and a piece of writing paper. He put the date at the top and wondered what to write. Should he write that his aunt had gone barmy, or that he needed rescue ASAP?

Dear Hermione,

It’s finally happened. My aunt has gone insane. I need you to do me a huge favor and get a hold of Dumbledore or some other Order member, the sooner the better! My aunt’s put me into a mental institution! A Muggle one! I need a rescue! I have no idea where I am, except this place is called St. Jude’s. They have psychologists here, and perky tutors. You would like her. She’s absolutely over the moon

with learning! Please, Hermione, call Dumbledore. I would even settle for a professor, except for Snape. I'm not that desperate, but pretty close to it. Please send word back soon as to when they are getting here so I know to be packed. I don't know how long I can last! I'll be waiting.

Harry

"Alright, Evan. You've been out of what we call 'conventional schooling' for quite a while. Don't worry, because we'll have an easier time to catch you up!" Harry idly wondered how long he could stand to be around this woman at a stretch. He was sure that something in the water was responsible for her odd behavior. "Would you like me to mail that for you?" She asked, motioning to the envelope.

"Yes, please." Harry said, handing it to her. "Thank you."

"Oh, it's not a problem. I'll just drop it in my outgoing mailbox." Skyla paused and looked at her watch. "Oh, dear! Time flies when you're having fun! It's time for dinner." Harry nodded and stood. "Let's go!" Harry paused.

"You don't have to walk me, Ms. uh..." This could be Harry's chance to run. He was sure that he could get around the corner and away to a secluded spot from which he could summon the Knight Bus.

"Call me Skyla or Sky, Evan. Staff must eat in the dining room at every meal, so it's not like I'm escorting you or anything. We're just walking together." Harry nodded. He had been so close to freedom! So close. "I don't know about you, but I'm starved!" She bounced out of the door, Harry close behind her.

They made it to the dining room, with Skyla only pausing long enough in her bouncing to post Harry's letter. Once the doors had opened, and Skyla had said goodbye, Harry heard his nickname bellowed. "OO7! We're over here!" Harry turned and went over to the table. Bug was practically begging Harry to sit next to him, while Sparky tried to pull Harry into a chair next to him. Sparky, for his smallness, won the battle.

“Hi, OO7! I see you’ve met Skyla. She’s great, isn’t she?” Harry nodded in agreement. She was okay.

“Okay, Sparky. You have to eat most of your spaghetti before you get any salad.” One of the boys said, dishing up Sparky’s plate.

“I can’t eat that much!” Sparky whined. Harry looked at the plate. It was only a spoonful. “Have you thought about any clubs you would like to join?” Sparky asked Harry as he tried to fend off more spaghetti from being placed on his plate.

“Not really.” Harry answered. He shot the boy with the spaghetti a warning look. “I’m not really sure what is offered. We’re not allowed to leave the dining hall early unless our plates are clean, right?” Harry asked Sparky.

“Yeah, I never get to leave early.” Sparky told him.

“Well, maybe you could show me around a bit before all those clubs started meeting?” Harry asked.

“To leave early would mean that I would have to eat all of that!” Sparky motioned towards his plate. Harry looked at it.

“Be grateful he didn’t give you any meatballs!” He returned. “He must want me to build muscle or something, giving me this much meat all at once.” Sparky blinked and stared off into space. Harry wondered if he had said something wrong.

“That was brilliant!” Bug’s voice whispered in his ear. “That’s why he wants to be thin, so that his muscle would show up more. He doesn’t understand that you need calories to build muscle.” Harry nodded in understanding.

“I mean, honestly, three whole meatballs. I’m going to look like a body builder at this rate!” Sparky stared at Harry before quietly requesting a meatball. The whole table was more than happy to comply with his wish, and a few seconds later, Sparky was the proud consumer of half a meatball. Across the dining hall, Sparky’s therapist nudged Paul and pointed.

“I don’t know what your kid said, but Sparky is eating!” Paul turned and looked at Harry. The kid was pure magic. The staff had been very close to force-feeding Sparky, and within twelve hours of Harry’s arrival, he had managed to convince Sparky into eating! Amazing!

Author’s Note: There are thirteen on my author alert list. Thirteen! I’m so happy! Thanks for reading and reviewing. They make me so happy.

Reviews:

The Incredible Bouncing Ferret: Just wait and see! Sylvia’s told me the whole story and I just can’t wait to see how it ends. Lots of emotion, don’t worry! Cute name.

Sasinak: Sylvia’s given me the fic. She can’t finish it, and I have ample free time. That and I love this story. The rest of the chapters will be up soon!

Midnight Lilly: I agree. Never thought about the Weasleys. Hermione, well, she’ll be in there somewhere.

E.A.V.: Never! She gave it to me. I’m tweaking the earlier chapters, so you may find something new in each. Have a look. The continuation will be up soon.

Kjady: Glad you like it, and I hope to live up to your expectations. It is Sylvia’s story, as in everything I write she approves before I post, but so far she’s really flexible with what I want to do, so long as it sticks to the original story.

Lady Arianna Riddle: Thank you for the wonderful compliment. I try.

Genna: I’m not giving anything away, but I think you will be pleasantly surprised somewhere down the line.

Ksomm814: If you like this, you may also like shadowsylvia’s work. This is her story. Glad you like it.

Thank you to: methoslover, Mimbulus, steffles, Classical-Storyteller, DianaBananna, Sirius's gurl, AeTeRa, LiLy MaLfOy13, QuicksilverWitch, and Nightwisp!

Author's Note: And here we go again! I'm posting the rest of what I am keeping now, so the fun can start soon. Hope you enjoy!

Harry paced in his room. He didn't want to go to sleep. He didn't want to wake up screaming to see Paul's concerned face and Jack holding him until he stopped thrashing. He didn't want another muscle relaxer, which was the only thing that they could give him to help the tremors from the Cruciatus Curse, and he certainly didn't want to be here! Harry whirled and paced the other way. Five steps down, and five steps back. Not much more to his room than that. This place grated on his nerves. They weren't watched, per se, nor were they neglected. Paul always was happy to see Harry, and just talked with Harry. He stayed away from any topics of conversation that Harry said he didn't want to talk about, and Harry was glad of it. The less he thought about it, the better. He sighed and rubbed at his scar. It was burning, but at least he was awake. Voldemort always had a harder time getting at his brain if he was awake. That didn't stop Voldemort from trying.

Harry had been in a session with Paul when his scar came alive and nearly blinded him with pain. He hadn't been able to keep Paul from noticing. Paul was a doctor, after all! He had been able to tell that Harry was in very intense pain. He had wanted to help. Harry almost laughed. What could a Muggle do for a magical curse scar? Nothing at all. No need to worry him about it. Paul, however, wouldn't leave it alone and kept poking at Harry until Harry told him that he had a bad headache. The aspirin shoved down his throat hadn't helped the pain at all. Paul had tried though.

Harry went over to his desk and pulled out the letter he had received from Hermione just the day before. He had crumpled it angrily when he had first read it, but now he viewed it as a comforting item. Hermione, at the very least, knew where he was. That didn't mean that she was going to help him get out!

Dear Harry,

Why, that's wonderful news, Harry! I'm so happy for you. Nice to know that your aunt is finally acting like the adult she should have been all along. I'm sure that you're making quite a few friends there.

There's got to be someone your age. Maybe you'll discover a hobby or something to lose yourself in. You have to admit, Harry, you do internalize a lot of what is bothering you. Muggle psychologists are bound by law to keep your secrets. Just thought you should know that bit.

I'm fine here. Mum and Dad are a little upset about the whole Ministry thing. After lots of threats about enrolling me in another school, I made them see reason. I've already started my homework (of course!) and am finding that I am quite looking forward to this year. Lots of new and interesting things to learn! If you want me to, I can get your sixth year books and send you my fifth year books so that you can start on your homework too! I'm not sure how much free time you have, but I'm sure that you can at least start the reading. Let me know! Arithmancy looks absolutely impossible, but I'm working hard on it. Please tell me that you've dropped that worthless Divination. Take something useful. Even Muggle Studies would be more beneficial to you than Divination. Hearing Professor Trelawny predict your death once a week is not good for you, as funny as Ron and you believe it to be.

Oh, my mom asked if you would like anything, like sweets or biscuits. She said that you need comfort food, as well as a good feeding up! I happen to agree!

I know that you're going to be horribly angry, Harry, but I absolutely refuse to call the old crowd or the headmaster. Rescue indeed! You need this, Harry! More than you realize. Just try, for me? Besides, Voldemort can't possibly find you if Dumbledore doesn't even know where you are. He would never imagine looking for you in a Muggle mental institution. Let's face it, Voldemort may be extremely evil in every sense of the word, but he is also very predictable. He'll think you're being guarded by fully-trained wizards, wands out and ready for any threat to you. He won't even try the Muggle world. Careful and well-placed comments have you hidden away in France somewhere, with a full compliment of Aurors guarding you.

The package has a surprise for you. Don't worry, it's completely muggle! I'm going to go now. Please write me back, even if it's just to

rant at me for refusing about the old crowd and the headmaster. I hope to hear from you soon!

Love,

Hermione

Harry had written back, and did indeed rant at her for refusing to aid in his rescue. The rant had continued for several sheets of paper, ending with a half-hearted request for Bertie Botts, if possible, regular jelly beans if it wasn't. He thanked her mother for her thoughtfulness and signed it off, with a post script thanking her for the journal. Harry reached out and fingered the book, allowing the fabric to play across his fingers.

He opened the front cover to see Hermione's inscription. "Nothing here can judge you, Harry. It's just you here." She had drawn a little happy face and signed with only a 'Mione'. Harry smirked a bit and regarded the lined pages warily. Writing it down would give someone proof of what he was feeling. It would put him at risk. It might also help, kind of like a Penseive. Harry tucked the book back into a drawer and sighed. Maybe tomorrow? He sucked in air as his scar kicked it up another notch. Oh, Voldemort was ticked! Harry wondered what was happening, but decided that he didn't want to see it. When he started falling asleep at the desk, he stood and resumed his pacing. He had to stay awake. He froze as he heard footsteps coming down the hall. He hit the desk lamp and jumped for his bed, quickly pulling the covers over his head and pretending that he was dead asleep. They would pass by and it would be another hour until another person would walk the halls. He almost jumped when he heard voices as his door opened. He clutched his wand beneath the blankets.

"How is he tonight, Jack?" Paul's voice asked. Harry relaxed. No danger at the moment.

"He's been sleeping ever since ten o'clock or so. He looked pretty tired in the art room tonight. Sparky said that he almost fell asleep in his paint." Harry smiled to himself, glad that his back was turned. Art was one of the few activities Harry had chosen to join. They didn't

mind if he drew pictures of castles, trolls, centaurs, and wizards. The art teacher loved his drawings and paintings, asking Harry if that was the reason he had attended a gifted school. He let her think so. He, for some reason, enjoyed painting, the harder the project, the better. He could stop thinking all together and just lose himself in the colors. He suspected that the feeling was similar to the feelings Snape had during a difficult potion. To do something, and do it well, was very gratifying. No wonder Snape got so ticked at students who didn't take Potions seriously.

"Good. I've been worried about him." He heard Jack grunt in agreement. "He's been looking so tired, and those nightmares!" Harry wished that they would stop whispering about him and just close his door so that he could get back out of bed.

"I know. Seems like he's going to get some rest tonight though. I heard Sparky bargaining with him. He offered to eat a whole slice of pizza if Evan there would just take a nap. Evan deflected the argument, saying that Sparky had to eat anyway if he wanted to go to art, and that he would sleep tonight." Paul chuckled a bit and smiled.

"Don't know what he did to Sparky, but it has helped Sparky get back into the habit of eating. Even if it's only the equivalent of half a meal, it's still something in his system." Jack agreed.

"Don't know if Evan knows how much that helps Sparky." Harry was all ears now. He just hated seeing others pass up perfectly good food.

"He may have saved Sparky's life. I wasn't sure how Sparky would have responded to being confined to bed again with a feeding tube. We've already had two rounds. I couldn't stand another, and I'm sure Sparky would have hated it." Paul and Jack's conversation drifted off to commonplaces. Harry considered the information he had heard. He had saved someone's life by getting him to eat? That was nothing! He just made Sparky see that in order to build muscle, he needed something to build them. It was nothing. Yet, the two of them had talked as though Harry had done something special. Harry wasn't sure what to make of it.

Paul and Jack's voices were steady. Harry didn't even realize that he was falling asleep. Jack listened for a minute, holding up a finger. "He finally go to sleep?" Paul asked.

“Finally. I could hear this child pacing as though he were agonizing over something. It’s not right, that he tries to stay up like this.” Paul nodded. “You find out anything, shrink?” Paul frowned.

“Think of the hardest brain teaser, multiply it by ten, and then triple it. Then, and only then, would you have Evan’s defense mechanisms. He’s so bloody good at keeping what ever he thinks needs to stay secret away from me. And it seems that he had a lot of them.” Jack motioned down the hallway. Paul and Jack collapsed at the nurses’ station and Paul pulled the coffee pot towards him. “I can’t get through.”

[illegible]

“Ah, Harry. So glad you could join me!” Voldemort said as Harry found himself in a dream. “I’ve missed you, Harry.” Voldemort said in his most gentle tone possible. Harry shuddered away from his touch.

“No, you didn’t.” He answered, gritting his teeth in pain. “You’ve been planning this, just like you do every time I fall asleep.” Harry rubbed at his scar. Voldemort waved a hand and conjured a bed. He waved his wand and levitated Harry to the bed. Harry fought to sit up, but Voldemort could be surprisingly strong in a dream. He tucked blankets in around Harry and stroked Harry’s hand. Harry tried to pull away, but found he couldn’t move much.

“Harry, why must you insist on continuing to fight against me? Wouldn’t it be easier to just give up?” He asked in a soothing, almost hypnotic tone. “You’re very powerful, Harry. So much so that Dumbledore is afraid of you.” Harry shivered, though he had no idea what caused it. Every time this happened, Voldemort made it pleasant. Soft, warm bed, cozy fireplace, soothing tones. There was just one thing wrong with the picture, and that was Voldemort himself. He had only tried to use another’s image once, and Harry’s reaction had discouraged him from using Sirius’s form. Harry wasn’t sure what

he had done, but Voldemort had left him alone for a full twenty-four hours. "I could help you become so much more than you are now. So much more a wizard." Harry wondered if Malfoy knew about this.

"I know your prices." He spat. Voldemort looked at him, slightly upset, but in a way that made Harry feel like he was a young child who had just disappointed a trusted adult. Harry hated that feeling, and ruthlessly pushed it aside. Voldemort may be able to manipulate his emotions while he was asleep, but he could do nothing to Harry's memories, no matter how much he tried.

"You don't have to keep fighting me, Harry. Just one simple word is all it takes, and everything stops. Dumbledore's manipulations, the Ministry, even others staring at you, goggling at your scar." Voldemort could make it so attractive. He should have gone into sales. He was one good talker.

"In exchange for groveling at your feet, constant pain and fear, and hurting innocents. Not worth it." Voldemort sighed in a way that made Harry feel like he was patiently going to explain again.

"I've explained this over and over. You'd be my second. The one to whom I would pass all my secrets. My equal." Harry again attempted to sit up, but only one hand restrained him and pushed him back into the pillows. "Harry, why won't you let me help you?" He asked.

"I will never be yours!" Harry snapped, trying to clear his emotions. Voldemort was feeding off Harry's needs, and Harry realized that he was extremely vulnerable. Voldemort reached out and stroked Harry's head.

"You will be, Harry. Once you realize that only I can help you. Only I can help you reach your full potential. That only I can protect you." Harry noted the desperation in Voldemort's voice and he knew that he was starting to succeed at getting Voldemort out of his mind. "A reminder, however, is in order, of what I am capable of!" Harry clenched his teeth as the spell hit him. "It doesn't have to be this way, stubborn child!" Harry heard him whisper as Voldemort left his mind. The curse continued for a few seconds before letting up. The cozy room disappeared as Harry heard voices calling him.

"Evan! Wake up!" Harry opened his eyes to see Jack there. He closed them again and tried to fight his way out of Jack's grasp. "Easy there, kiddo! Whatever you were dreaming about is gone." Harry pushed at Jack's hands. He knew he was shaking from the Cruciatus curse, and he knew what it looked like to Jack. Harry wanted to explain that Voldemort would never be gone, and that he was far closer than either Jack or Paul knew. Paul came in holding two cups.

"I'll take him, Jack." Paul said. Harry groaned as Jack pushed him back into his bed and stood. Harry just wanted to be left alone. Paul waited until Jack had shut the door behind him before speaking. "What was your dream about, Harry?" Harry took a deep breath and sighed.

"I can't remember." Harry remembered. He remembered very well. The fact that with a few words and gestures from Voldemort made him so weak, even in his own mind. That he had been helpless. How was he supposed to defeat Voldemort when he couldn't even sit up and stay up? The world was doomed, and it would be all Harry's fault. Voldemort would get both the world, and Harry, in one second. Paul shook his head, reminding Harry of Voldemort and the way he had looked, as though Harry had disappointed him.

"I think you do." Paul said, reaching out to touch Harry. Harry jerked away from his hand. Voldemort might be able to manipulate Harry's self-sufficiency in his subconscious, but Paul couldn't, and Harry took that for all it was worth. Paul moved his hand back and looked at Harry. "You know that it's not normal for a teenager to wake up from a dream, shaking and screaming, right?" Harry almost laughed.

"Who says I'm normal?" Harry rubbed at his scar. There wasn't pain there, just warmth, like Voldemort was trying something, but his intent was not to hurt Harry. Manipulation. That snake was so good at it.

"What I'm trying to say is that there is something seriously wrong for you to be having such violent reactions to dreams." Paul explained. Harry shrugged. "You're still shaking, Harry. Something obviously disturbed you greatly. Why won't you tell me? I'm not here to judge

you. I'm here to help you!" Harry pulled the blanket around him and sighed.

"Would you believe that there is an evil maniac wizard with whom I share some sort of telepathic link? And that he uses my dreams as some sort of sadistic torture in futile efforts to get me to join him?" Harry said, wanting to see Paul's reaction. Paul blinked a couple of times. Well, that explained a few things. This was something more than just nightmares. Harry might have a condition!

"What's this wizard's name?" Harry couldn't believe that Paul hadn't dismissed what he had just said.

"Voldemort." Harry answered. His scar felt funny again. He rubbed at it. "This scar is what caused it, this link he and I share. He gave it to me." Harry yawned a bit. He was so tired, but if he went back to sleep, Voldemort would be there again. Just like he had been for the last two weeks. Every time Harry had closed his eyes, Voldemort had been there. It hadn't been too frightening at first. Harry could stand up to him and literally push him out of his mind. Now, Harry guessed that Voldemort was making sure that he was too weak to do much to him. "He wanted to kill me when I was a baby. Something went wrong with his spell. The killing curse rebounded and destroyed his body. That's why I'm the Boy Who Lived. I'm famous in the wizarding world, you know." Paul could hear the capitalization of the title. "That didn't stop him from coming back. He wanted to kill me, but now, he's being nice to me, and I won't join him. He always displays his power right before I wake up. It hurts." Harry realized that he was babbling, but couldn't seem able to stop. "I just want it to stop. He won't leave me alone."

"It is okay, Harry. I'm here and I'll stay with you. Will you sit up and take these for me?" Paul asked, holding up a cup. Two pills were in it.

"What is it?" Paul had never met such suspicious kid before.

"Sleeping pills, to help you sleep." Harry shook his head.

"I don't want to dream again." Harry refrained from pleading, but it seemed that Paul had understood.

"These will knock you out to the point where you won't be able to dream. Not entirely healthy, but you won't have a dream." Dreamless Sleep. Harry knew what that meant. He could have visions, but not those oh so creepy dreams that Voldemort loved to make for Harry. Harry reached out and popped the pills in his mouth. Paul handed him a glass of water. Harry tossed it back and swallowed.

"Thanks, Paul." Paul nodded and sat next to the bed, watching as the pills took effect. "Voldemort's the reason I shouldn't be here, you know." Harry slurred. "He'll kill you all, all the Muggles in the world, just to get at me. Too many people dead because of me. Sirius, Cedric, Mum and Dad." Harry shrugged. "Think I'm going to fall asleep now."

"You go ahead and do that." Harry couldn't even nod. His eyes closed and he drifted off. Paul stood and started pacing. There was something wrong with Harry. Something that no one at his school had noticed. Paul would have to check to see what some of the symptoms meant, but he was confident that with the right combination of medication and therapy, Harry could have a normal life. It had been done before. Paul stopped as a letter sitting out on the desk caught his eye. He was curious. Who was it from? What did it say?

Paul knew that if he read it and Harry found out, the boy may never speak to him again. But, his curiosity got the best of him. He picked it up. Ministry? Arithmancy? Divination? Muggle Studies? Voldemort. Paul dropped the letter. Harry had told his friends? Paul read the rest of the letter. If the letter was to be believed, Harry was actually a wizard and there was a character known as Voldemort after him. Oh, dear. He pulled out a pen and wrote down the return address. He needed to speak with this girl and find out if this was a game she and Harry had thought up, or if indeed there were wizards and the like. Doing so would tell him in what direction to take his sessions with Harry. He re-read the letter and replaced it on the desk. Hermione's house was only an hour. He could be there by seven. He only hoped that the Grangers were early risers. He needed to be back in time for his session with Harry.

Paul pulled up in front of a house and checked the address again, just to be sure that he hadn't become lost. If Harry and the letter were

true, he was on his way to talk to a real wizard. Witch. Sorceress. Whatever girls were called, he was on his way to speak to one. He parked his car and noticed that the house looked completely normal. Well, appearances were deceiving. Once inside, he was sure that he could see all types of magical things. He was actually a little eager to believe that there was magic. After all, who wouldn't want to see magic come true.

He knocked on the door and waited, wondering if the family was up yet. "I've got it, Mum!" A voice said from inside. The door opened to reveal a girl around Harry's age with slightly bushy hair and brown eyes. "Can I help you?" She asked.

"I'm looking for a Hermione Granger. Are you she?" He asked. Hermione's eyes narrowed and he noticed her hand move to her pocket.

"Depends on who you are, what you want, and why you want to speak with her." Paul figured that all magical people were suspicious and paranoid by nature. That could be the only explanation.

"My name is Dr. Paul Lauter, I have some questions about your friend, Harry Potter, and I hope that you'd be willing to answer them." He told her. Best to be straight forward with her.

"You're Harry's doctor?" She asked. Paul nodded. "Sorry about the inquisition, but once I've explained things, I'm sure you'll understand." She beckoned him into the living room and sat down, motioning him towards a seat. "What do you want to know, Dr. Lauter?" She asked.

"Please call me Paul. Harry had a bit of a rough night last night, and told me some things. Normally, I wouldn't break his confidence, but I need to verify what he said so that I know in which direction to take his treatment. I was hoping that you could help me." Hermione sat back and nodded. Paul looked up to see a woman standing in the doorway.

"It's okay, Mum. This is Harry's doctor, Paul Lauter. Paul, this is my mother, Dr. Granger." Hermione saw his next question coming. "She's an orthodontist." Paul nodded and greeted Dr. Granger.

Hermione's mother told her that she was going to the office now and that both her father and mother could be reached there, should Hermione need anything. "Is Harry okay, Paul?" Hermione asked.

"He's fine, physically." Hermione smiled. "I came across a letter from you, addressed to Harry, which is how I found you. There are classes that you mention. Arithmancy? Muggle Studies? Divination? Are all of these actual classes at your school?" Hermione smiled and nodded. "What, exactly, does 'Muggle' mean?" Hermione giggled.

"A non-magical person born to non-magical people is a Muggle. You are a Muggle. My parents are Muggles." She told him. "There is magic, if that's what you're wondering." She said, pleased to see the dumbfounded look. "I would show you some, but I'm not allowed to practice magic while school is out." He nodded in understanding. Magic was real. Paul realized that everything he knew about the world was wrong. "The magical world hides from the rest of the world. We don't normally allow non-magical people know about us. The only reason my parents know about the magical world is for the sole fact that I was born with magic and am considered powerful enough to train in its uses." Paul nodded, waiting for Hermione to go on.

"When I received my acceptance letter from Hogwarts, my school, we all thought it was a joke, until a witch and a wizard appeared on our doorstep to explain." She smiled. "My father nearly fainted dead away when he saw a teacup levitated. That's just parlor tricks." She chewed her lip. "Hang on a second, I think we still have the pamphlet somewhere about introduction to the magical world." Hermione left the room and returned just a few seconds later with two books and a pamphlet in her hands. "These will help later. Now, is there anything specific that you want to know?" Paul allowed his brain to catch up with him and nodded.

"Harry mentioned a wizard by the name of Voldemort. Who's he?" Hermione frowned.

"What did he say about him?" Paul checked his notebook.

"Harry said that Voldemort is 'an evil maniac wizard' with whom he shares a 'telepathic' link. Also that Voldemort uses dreams as a

‘sadistic torture in futile efforts to get me to join him’. What does all of that mean?” Paul asked. He noticed that Hermione had turned slightly pale.

“Well, Voldemort is an evil wizard, and Harry does indeed share a link with him, through his scar.” Paul sat back and regarded Hermione. He couldn’t believe that that was true. “Harry and Voldemort go way back, as long as Harry has been alive, really. In fact, I picked up the book that has the whole story in it.” Hermione started flipping through the book, obviously looking for a well-known page. Paul used the time to sort his thoughts. Magic was real, Harry had been telling the truth, and there was indeed a maniac wizard after Harry. No wonder the boy was so hesitant to say anything. He was most likely afraid of being sent to a real mental ward, one that restrained people and drugged them to make them manageable! Harry was afraid that Paul would think that he was crazy, and Paul had been ready to pronounce him as such.

“Here it is!” She announced. Paul looked at the title. The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts. Interesting. “Harry’s mentioned here.” She said, pointing to the page. Paul noticed moving pictures. Well, that was different. “The Boy Who Lived.” Hermione handed it to him. Paul read through the article and sighed. That poor boy.

“Did Harry know about this, growing up?” he asked. Hermione shook her head.

“He didn’t know until he found out about Hogwarts. Probably around the same time I did, when he got his acceptance letter. The Boy Who Lived stuff came later, when he first went to the wizarding street in London. It was a shock. He was used to thinking of himself as ‘just Harry’, and then he’s told that he’s famous for something he couldn’t even remember.” Hermione shrugged. “He’s handled fame much better than I would have, that’s for sure.” She admitted.

“So, something happened to the spell that Voldemort tried to use to kill Harry, and Harry survived a spell that is supposedly impossible to survive, right?” Hermione nodded. “Anything else? It seemed that Voldemort was gone.”

“Voldemort’s body was destroyed, but not his spirit. He’s back now. Harry blames himself.” Paul was about to say that Harry had nothing to do with it when Hermione continued talking. “Voldemort found out about a spell that used the blood of his enemy to bring him back to corporal form. That enemy was Harry. Voldemort killed a schoolmate in front of Harry, and then tried to kill Harry. No one is exactly sure of how Harry managed to survive that time.” Paul looked up.

“That time?” Hermione nodded.

“Harry’s met Voldemort a total of five times. He’s beat him four times, including the first time when he was a baby. Most of the teachers at school keep wondering when he’ll stop coming back. All of the students do the same. Harry’s built a persona around that idea, that he’ll keep surviving. Now, everyone expects him to continue, and Harry seems to have the idea that he will be the one to kill Voldemort, the only one able to do it. That I don’t understand at all.” She sighed. “He keeps to himself, unless Ron and I bully him into talking about it, and then we are never sure about how much Harry is actually telling us.”

“You said that most of the teachers wonder when Harry will stop coming back. Are there any who believe otherwise?” he asked. If there were, that teacher could be instrumental in helping Harry. Hermione smiled.

“According to Professor Snape, Harry is lucky to have survived as long as he has with his ‘apparent disregard for the rules and well-being of others’.” Hermione said.

“Who is he?” Hermione’s smiled died.

“He’s our Potions professor. He’s brilliant at Potions, very clever. Intimidating to a fault. He hates Harry with a passion, or so he says. His actions lend evidence to the contrary. He’s saved Harry’s life a few times already.” Interesting. Very interesting.

“What’s their personal relationship like?” Hermione snickered.

“Mutual unadulterated loathing.” She responded. “Harry dislikes him, and Snape is the same.” She shrugged. “Snape does his duty as a teacher, and then some, but he seems to despise being in the same room with Harry.” She frowned. “That’s what went wrong with Occlumency, I’m sure of it.” Paul raised an eyebrow.

“Occlumency?” Hermione smiled.

“I’m not sure what it is, exactly. Harry was learning it to block Voldemort from his head. Voldemort was tricking Harry, using his dreams to send him things that would give him more access to Harry. It worked and Harry came very close to being killed. Professor Snape was asked to teach Harry Occlumency, but something happened and the lessons stopped. Sounds like Harry needs those lessons again.” Paul sighed. How in the world was he going to give Occlumency lessons? Perhaps he could write to that teacher? How in the world did a person contact a wizard? “Harry told me that Occlumency was about ‘clearing your mind’, and to keep emotions from getting the best of you. I’m still unsure about what that means.” She admitted. Paul smiled. He had an idea of what that meant. That sounded like meditation! He could definitely teach Harry meditation. That was very easy.

“Now that I know that Harry was indeed speaking the truth, we’ll have an easier time in figuring out his treatment. Unfortunately, I have to get back so that I’m in time for our session.” Paul said, standing.

“Of course. If you need anything else, just call me.” Hermione wrote out her number. “I’ll be happy to give you a magical perspective.” Paul thanked her and returned to his car. He now knew what to talk about today in their session, and how he could help Harry. He only hoped that Harry would be willing to work with him.

Author’s Note: Well, that’s it. From here on out, it will be just what I’ve written. Nervous? Who’s nervous? A big thank you to the 28 people who have put me on their author alert list. Think you all could review and tell me how I’m doing after the next chapter? Let me know if I’m staying true to the story or not. I would appreciate it. And to the five who have me on their favorites, I now understand what Sylvia meant

by “bubbling joy” when she described what it was like. Bubbling joy.
Thank you!

Author's Note: Erm, I'm sorry? I've been busy, really busy. Between school, work, and family, I just haven't had much time. Sylvia and I worked on this chapter for a whole weekend until we were both satisfied. I'm sorry if it seems short, but the next one will be a little longer for you all.

I have messed up. I have broken a wizarding law. Not just any law, but the whole secrecy law. I am waiting for Ministry officials to come storming in and break my wand.

Well, four hours have passed and nothing has happened. I made it through lessons with Sky (history is funny from a Muggle perspective) and am now waiting for Paul who seems to be running late. Not that I care or anything. He did say we'd play chess, which I would like to do.

That was unexpected. Paul was thrilled to see me writing in here. He mentioned something about expressing my feelings in writing. Right. Well, I don't have to talk in group therapy if I'm writing, so I plan to take advantage of this...not that I don't like the other guys, because I do. I just can't imagine telling them that my presence here has endangered their lives. That wouldn't go over well at all. If I am going to stretch this out for a whole hour, I'm going to have to do more than just ramble.

Name: Harry James Potter aka The Boy Who Lived, top of Voldemort's hit list

Age: 15 – I would be happy to see adulthood.

Parents: James and Lily Potter – deceased at the hands of Voldemort...protecting me

Friends: Hermione Granger – 16 Always right

Ron Weasley – 15 Chudley Cannons Maniac

Neville Longbottom – 15 Herbology Master

Ginny Weasley – 14 As intimidating as her mother

Luna Lovegood – 14? Words of Wisdom

Remus Lupin – Moony

Not Friends: Voldemort – Half-blood charlatan

Malfoy – Muggleborns hit him.

Snape - Greasy Git Number One

Family: Uncle Vernon – likes to shout

Aunt Petunia – misguided philanthropist

Dudley – rotund cousin

Teachers: Hagrid – beware of rock cakes...and Fluffy

McGonagall – meow! Brilliant transfiguration teacher

Snape – Greasy git. Saved my life a few times. Still don't like him.

Binns – zzzzzzzzzzzz Never been awake long enough to form an opinion

Trelawny –“ I see! I see!” - justified thrashings

Frienze – stars, planets, cool. Saved my life once.

Flitwick – “Squeak!” and then Boom! Nice fellow.

Dumbledore – “Lemon Drop?” meddling old coot

Attempts on my Life: first year of life, first year of school, second year of school, fourth year of school, fifth year of school. Egads! How am I still alive? Oh yeah. Others die when I should have died. Sirius. Cedric. Mum. Dad.

My Ambition: If I should manage to make it to adulthood, I would like to be an Auror.

Why I Feel I Won't Live: Trelawney made a stupid prophecy. Enough said. Now I'm the only one who can kill the stupid Dark Lord.

Why My Life Sucks: I'm famous. My relatives hate me. I don't belong anywhere. People have died because of me. Dumbledore manipulates my life and keeps things from me. Snape doesn't see the real me and this time I've proved him right. I can be so stupid. I led my friends into danger. Sirius died because of me. My friends could have died. I'm jealous of Ron, he's jealous of me, and I don't know how to stop it. Voldemort's attacking my mind. I can't sleep. I'm getting weaker. I want to give up but I can't because I'm the bloody Boy Who Can't Die.

Half an hour left! What else can I write about?

I don't really belong in either world, you know? Great, I really do belong here at St. Jude's. I'm addressing inanimate objects. At least it doesn't talk back.

Told Paul about Voldemort last night. He asked a lot of questions this morning, but once we started playing chess, he slowed down. He seemed to really like descriptions of Hogwarts. Asked a lot of questions about the building itself. Staircases must fascinate him, and the Great Hall made him gaze at his ceiling with a mournful look. I don't think he really believes me.

Voldemort's getting better at the dream thing. I'm actually looking forward to that bed. Wonder if Paul will give me sleeping pills if I ask? Don't think I could say no tonight. I'm just so tired. Maybe, if I apologized to Snape, he'd be willing to teach me again. No, he hates me. If he delivered me to Voldemort, I wouldn't blame him.

"Evan!" Harry looked up, surprised to see that group was over. Where had everyone gone? "You have a visitor." Harry didn't feel any pain in his scar. Better to check.

"What do they look like?" Harry asked as he packed up his journal and pen. Jack grinned.

"Very pretty young lady. Brown eyes, brown hair, answers to the name of Hermione." Harry smiled a bit. Well, if it was an assassin of Voldemort's, he picked the right disguise. "Girlfriend?" Jack asked, leading Harry downstairs to the visitation room.

"No. She's just a friend. But a good one." Jack gave Harry a look that told Harry that Jack knew better than that. Harry let it drop. He found that once Jack had an idea in his head, it would take a rather large amount of evidence to the contrary before Jack accepted the truth about a situation.

"You guys have a nice visit. She can stay until dinner time." Harry thanked Jack and went into the room, pulling his wand as the door closed behind him."

"Tell me something that only you would know." He told her, pointing his wand at her head. Hermione smiled and stood up.

"When you first wrote to me, you said that your aunt had gone insane and that you wanted me to contact anyone from the old crowd, except for Snape, because you weren't that desperate. I wrote back to you and said that I would not, because I feel that you need this, at least for now." Hermione tilted her head to the side. "So, is it the real me?" She asked, giving Harry a small smile. Harry put his wand back up his sleeve. No assassins for now. Hermione came over and hugged him, not giving him time to step away or move. "It's okay, Harry." Harry wasn't sure why, but those words made him feel like something was breaking. He wrapped his arms around Hermione and took a deep breath, wondering why he wanted to cry. Nothing had happened. He put his head down on her shoulder and sighed. This was nice. "I got your letter." She told him. He looked around. "Sorry, no old crowd. But, I did bring you a few things to make your stay here a little easier." She pulled Harry over to the couch and sat down. A bag was sitting on the cushions.

"You didn't have to do this." Harry said. Hermione shrugged and opened the bag.

"Consider it your birthday present, if you want. I will be leaving these things here and I'm sure you will some use out of them." Harry smiled.

Hermione was always right. "Mostly Muggle things, really. Except for the books and some candy." She piled several books next to her and produced a white box. "Mum sent brownies. She mentioned something about you being too skinny." Harry groaned.

"Mrs. Weasley must be multiplying." He said, taking the brownie Hermione offered from her and biting into it. "Not that I'm complaining. This is good." Hermione nodded.

"Mum's brownies are best served warm with ice cream and chocolate fudge sauce, but I figured this was the best I could do. She wants you to eat all of them, by the way." Harry smiled and finished it. He could not see having any problems with that. Hermione handed him a Chocolate Frog box. "Let's work on that collection of yours." She opened hers and caught the frog. Harry opened his own and munched off the head before the frog had time to escape from its box. "Gruesome, Harry. Oh, another Dumbledore." She said, pulling the card free from the box.

"Don't even show it to me." Harry said. "Hmm, wizard who cast most Jelly Leg Jinxes." Harry told Hermione, showing her his card.

"Why are you mad at him, Harry?" Hermione asked as she opened the jelly beans and poured some into his hand.

"I'm not ready to talk about it yet." He nibbled one jelly bean and smiled. Strawberry.

"Yet' implies you will talk about it, right?" Hermione asked, pulling a face at a spinach bean. "Yuck." She took another and smiled. "Vanilla."

"In time. Just not now. So, besides books and sugar, what else did you bring me?" Hermione dug into the bag and pulled out a small CD player.

"A CD player." Hermione said, showing it to Harry. Harry gave her a look. Oh, honestly, Harry! Just because I am a witch and attend the best school of magic, it doesn't mean that I am completely unused to Muggle technology." She pulled out some CDs and stacked them on

the table. "These are some of my favorites. Don't worry, these are copies, so you can keep them. The Discman is an old one of mine, so you shouldn't feel like you're depriving me or anything."

Thanks, Hermione. This is nice." Harry remembered that Muggle technology was fairly expensive.

"So, what now?" Harry asked, placing the CD player down carefully on the couch. Hermione grinned.

"I brought you two more things." Hermione grinned.

"Slinky!" She pulled out a box and handed it to Harry. "These should be required in all hospital stays." She told him. Harry took the box and stared at it.

"A Slinky?" he asked.

"Yes, Harry. It's called a Slinky, and it's a toy. Something fun. Remember fun?" Harry tolled his eyes and took the Slinky out of the box. "Oh, honestly. You'll figure out what to do with it soon enough. It's good for boredom." Harry nodded and put it back in the box. Hermione forced another brownie into his hand and nibbled on one herself. "So, are you writing in your journal?" She asked.

"Yes, mother." Harry said. Hermione took one of the couch pillows and hit Harry on the head. She giggled when she saw his surprised look. "You realize that this means war?" He asked, grabbing his own pillow. Hermione took her pillow in a firmer grip and grinned.

"Paul! Come here!" Paul looked up from the file he was reading and out into the hall. "You've got to see this!" Jack called from the hallway. Paul raised an eyebrow and went down to Jack. "This is so cute!" Paul peeked into the window and saw Harry jumping on the furniture, dodging pillows thrown by his friend. Paul watched as Harry launched his own attack. It was good to see Harry relax a little.

"Leave him to it, Jack. He needs to let off some steam." Jack nodded and turned back to the window. Paul walked away, needing to continue his paperwork.

“Surrender to my wrath!” Hermione tossed a pillow at Harry’s head.

“Never!” Harry fell off the couch and rolled away from Hermione, climbing to his feet and pulling another pillow from the couch. “The Boy Who Lived never surrenders!” Hermione launched another pillow and ducked as Harry’s pillow came near her face.

“The insufferable know – it- all says you will!” Harry threw another pillow and grinned back at her.

“Gryffindor’s Golden Boy will never leave the Light Side.” Hermione collapsed on the ground, laughing too hard to continue. “Ah, I have vanquished the enemy.” Harry sat down next to her. “So, what did you find so funny?” He asked as she took a deep breath.

“That Light Side comment.” She said, sitting up. “It made a movie pop into my head.” Harry gestured for her to continue. “Star Wars. That movie is all about the light and the dark side.” Harry’s blank face told her he hadn’t seen it. “Look it up while you’re here. It kind of applies to you, Skywalker.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Guess that’s my nickname now?” He asked as he helped Hermione fix the damage the two had inflicted during their sugar-high.

“When you figure out who he is, I think you’ll be flattered. Ask your therapist. He might know.” Hermione started packing everything into the bag. “I’ll bring more junk food next time I come.” Harry looked up at her.

“Next time?” Hermione smiled.

“You’re in the Muggle world now. I can visit whenever I want. I’m pretty close to you, and my parents do try to encourage me to see my friends. You’re closest, and I’m sure you didn’t think I would just leave you here all alone?” She smiled and slapped him lightly on the arm. “You did, didn’t you?” She didn’t need an answer when she saw his face. “Oh, Harry.” She pulled him into a hug and refused to let go. Harry returned the embrace and told her he would be fine. “In the

future, maybe. You're not 'fine' now." Harry sighed, almost wanting to say that she was right.

Author's Note: Thank you to everyone who took the time to review. I loved reading them.

Sauron the Dark: Don't worry. Hermione is Hermione. She knows exactly what she is doing. That should tell you something.

Molly Morrison: Sorry Molly. I really am. I had the intention to post, and then I never got around to it. Lovely review, by the way. Thanks for the confidence vote. Sylvia and I worked hard on this. Thanks for sticking by me.

Preoperative: Girls coming soon. Don't worry.

Ohime-Yukigi: I agree. We are onions. Petunia is such a fun character.

Purplemonkey: You're right. There was. Some of it will come later, but the rest I've thrown out. Harry and Paul are still forming a relationship. It's getting there. Thank you.

Princessxoxo145: As often as I can. I'm in college, work, and have several activities. I'll try to update as often as possible. I give no timelines, however.

Cat: Thanks for the great information. I will definitely do something like that. As for the trust fall, maybe much later in the story, if ever. Sylvia was a bit ambitious with that. She and I have talked and she just moaned, put her head down on the desk, and threatened my life if I ever spoke of it again. In other words, she's typical Sylvia when she knows that she messed up.

Kungzoune: You don't regret it? Er, thanks? No, seriously. I'm glad you like it.

Sheila: You left off in the middle of a sentence. Please review again and finish it. Otherwise, thanks for taking the time!

The Hufflepunk: Thanks. That was a wonderful review.

DuShuZi: Wait and see.

E.A.V.: Thanks. Sylvia has been at me to post, so here it is.

Thanks goes out to: Shawn Pickett, ERMonkey, Burner of Cookies, Ava Munroe, drarrysev, Eliza Guerin, steffles24, Micka, Mimbulus, Meggplant, steffles, Shadowface, sasinak, Tainted-Eve, methoslover, Midnight Lilly, ksomm. Thanks for all your awesome reviews, encouragement, and patience. I hope to live up to the faith you all have put in me.

Author's Note: Hi all! I'm back. Sylvia requested my presence. Here's the next chapter. I hope you all enjoy. Also, it was brought to my attention that answering reviews may be annoying to some of you. If you really want an answer, include your email. I'll answer that way.

Harry waved as Hermione left the building, her gifts sitting next to him. He really did appreciate her coming down to see him. Harry just wished she could have brought the Order as well. He would have accepted Professor Snape, after he told the man off for being a narrow-minded git who couldn't see past his own childhood to help his student. Then, Harry would apologize and ask Snape to help him master Occlumency. He wasn't ready to face Dumbledore just yet, or Voldemort, for that matter.

"Hey, buddy." Harry looked up to see Paul standing there. "How'd your visit go?" Paul asked, thinking Harry looked a little depressed.

"It went well. Hermione brought me some things." Harry said, gesturing to the bag. Paul nodded. He would have to look through them.

"Care to show me?" Harry nodded and led Paul into the visitation room. He sat down at the table and pulled out the Slinky, smiling when Paul's face lit up. "Slinky. Very cool."

"Hermione said that a Slinky was a requirement for very hospital stay. I've never had one before." Harry said as he pulled out the box of brownies. "Her mother's brownies." Paul smiled again.

"Sugar rush, I'm sure." He told Harry as he stacked CDs up on the table.

"You can have one. If I don't eat the rest of them, Mrs. Granger might be upset and decide to hold me hostage to fatten me up." Paul shook his head.

"Maybe later. Books?" Harry⁶ nodded.

"Some are magic." Harry told him. "Chocolate frogs." He put the box of jelly beans on the table. "Every flavor means every flavor. These

are dangerous, because you never really know what flavor you're going to get." Harry saw Paul looking through the books.

"Shakespeare, Dickens. Your friend has good taste." Harry nodded. Hermione was Hermione. Paul handed him a book. "Check out the note on the flyleaf." Harry opened it and looked.

Read Henry the Fourth, part 1 and 2 and Henry the Fifth. He reminds me of you, Harry.

Hermione

"Ever read those plays?" Paul asked, picking up one of the magical books.

"No, sir." Paul raised an eyebrow.

"Don't 'sir' me." Paul told Harry. "It makes me feel old." Harry smiled. He reached out and played with the Slinky. "You might identify with Henry. Your attitudes are really close to the other." Harry nodded, wondering when would be a good time to bring up the sleeping pills. "Moving pictures!"

"Pictures do that in the magical world." Harry told him. Paul's face didn't look shocked, exactly, just a little taken aback, like he had forgotten about that piece of information. Harry had a feeling that Paul had not believed him. Well, what sane Muggle would? Harry knew how the man felt. After all, he had not believed Hagrid at first until he had proof. "You okay?" Harry asked.

"I'll be fine. Just give my mind a second. It doesn't like shocks." Harry saw one of the books Hermione had given him and pulled it towards him. He flipped it open and scanned the index. He found the right page and shoved it towards Paul.

"That's the ceiling of the Great Hall at Hogwarts." Paul's face was priceless as he watched the ceiling change from sunny day to starry night. "The ceiling shows the weather outside, too." Harry said, wondering if he would ever get Hogwarts: A History back from Paul.

"I want one of these ceilings." Paul told him. Harry smiled and nodded. He wanted the same thing done at the Dursley's.

"Um, Paul?" Paul looked up.

"Yes?" Harry took a deep breath. It was just a simple question. He could ask a simple question.

"Could I have sleeping pills tonight?" Paul closed the book and sat back, taking in Harry's posture.

"Why?" Paul asked.

"Just wondering." Harry turned back to the Shakespeare book.

"You had to have a reason for asking." Paul pressed. Harry shrugged.

"I thought that I would sleep better." He told Paul.

"Everyone sleeps better when they're drugged. What was your specific reason?" Paul reached out and took the book Harry was looking at. Distractions would not help right now. "I want to help you, but I can't help you until you tell me what you need." Paul looked at Harry's face. "Is it your nightmares?"

"Not nightmares." Harry said. "I don't know what they are, precisely. It's something Voldemort does." Paul nodded.

"So Voldemort is real?" Harry smirked.

"Unfortunately." Paul leaned forward, knowing that Harry had something more to say. "He does something while I'm dreaming. Everything he does while I'm there feels real." Harry sighed. "If he touches me, I feel it. Any furniture he puts there feels real. I can feel the heat from the fireplace. If he conjures any food, it smells real. Any spells he casts feels real, too. He manipulates me. I'm so weak and he lets it show." Harry got up from the table and paced. "I tell myself it's not real, that I can beat him. It doesn't happen. I get weaker every time." Harry stopped pacing and just stood there, head hanging. "The

sleeping pills prevent him from getting into my head. Not even Dreamless Sleep Potion does that.”

“Are you dreaming when he comes up?” Harry nodded.

“He always shows up during a dream.” Harry told him, ignoring Paul’s gesture to sit down. He wanted to pace. He was frustrated, so he was going to pace! “It’s almost as though he stops the dream and makes everything else go away. Then, he just takes over.” Paul watched Harry pace for a few seconds.

“I’m guessing that you don’t like that much?” Paul said in an effort to get Harry talking again. Harry froze in his pacing and snorted.

“Ironical that you say that.” He told Paul, putting his hands in his pockets. He sighed and stared at a spot in front of him, unseeing of the room around him. “I’m starting to like it. He makes it comfortable, soothing, calm. Everything that my life is not.” Harry said in a dead voice. “If it weren’t for his shows of power at the end of it, showing me what will happen if I don’t accept his offers, I would truly look forward to it. Welcome it, actually.”

“Offers?” Paul asked. Harry’s face took on a look that frightened Paul. He had had a lot of clients in his practice, and many of them needed a lot of help, but none of them had looked at Paul like Harry’s look.

“I’d become his second. His right-hand man. His equal.” Harry’s cynical words bit into the air. “The only thing is, he forgot something. Or, he didn’t know it in the first place.” Harry told Paul. “He’s already marked me as his equal.” Harry lifted up his fringe and revealed his scar. “Oh, if he knew.” Harry trailed off, thinking of things that Paul was afraid to wonder about. What had happened to this kid? What was this “marking as an equal” stuff?

“You have not accepted his offers?” Harry shook his head. “Why?” There had to be a reason.

“Aside from the torturing of innocents, killing people, bowing down to his feet?” Paul blinked. Well, when he put it that way, it was understandable. “I don’t like him.” He answered shortly. Well, that

was simple. "He killed my parents when I was a year old." Harry told him. "Gave me this." Harry gestured to his scar. "Now, we share a wonderful connection that feeds on emotions. His mostly, though he likes to send me nightmares with mine. Recently, those dreams I've been talking about." Harry dropped down into his chair. "I have no aspirations for power, to join his little group of mad followers. I just want to be me, live my life, and forget about him. That's not going to happen." Paul raised an eyebrow.

"Why not?" Paul asked. Harry snorted and smiled at Paul.

"Dumbledore. My headmaster. He's oh-so-concerned with my safety." Harry folded his arms. "I realize that he does what he thinks is best. It just doesn't work with me." Harry told Paul. "He won't let me just up and leave. He thinks that Voldemort will find me and kill me." Harry paused and smiled. "I've been here how long?" He asked.

"About a week and a half." Paul answered. "Give or take a day." Harry smirked.

"Well, Dumbledore's wrong. If Voldemort hasn't shown yet, I doubt he's looking for me at the moment. If I ever tell you to run, I suggest you take it. They like to play with non-magic beings." Paul looked at Harry, wondering where such a hard glint came from. Experience, most likely.

"So, the reason you're requesting sleeping pills is?" Paul asked. Get Harry away from depressing thoughts! Get Harry away from depressing thoughts!

"I can't keep up the resistance much longer. I'm just so tired now. He's getting better at it, you see. I don't know how much longer I can keep it up." Paul reached out and put a hand over Harry's own. Harry looked up and met his eyes.

"I'll make sure you get some tonight." Harry nodded, rubbing at his face.

"Thank you." Harry said sincerely. Paul handed some things for Harry to put back in his bag.

“No problem. If you need anything while you’re here, that’s what I’m here for. As long as it isn’t illegal.” Harry snickered and lowered some of the books into the bag.

“Okay.” Harry told him. Paul looked down the magical books. Some of the titles were self-explanatory. One, however, he could not identify.

“Harry? What is Occlumency?” Harry looked up. Paul held up the book.

“No way! I swore that no book existed that could help.” Harry reached out and took the book. “Occlumency is a way of protecting your mind. I was trying to learn it to keep Voldemort out of my mind.” Harry opened the book. A piece of parchment came out.

No wonder Mrs. Weasley tells us to stay out of Knockturn Alley. Scary place! This author is a well-known in Occlumency, Harry. I checked Flourish and Blotts for a list, and he was at the top. The man I talked to told me that he was the best and the book was excellent. Hope it helps. Please destroy this note so that no evidence exists of my visiting Knockturn Alley. Mrs. Weasley would kill me!

Harry chuckled and slid the note back into the book. “She visited a not so reputable shop for this. I’m going to need to think of a good way to thank her.” Paul looked at the book.

“Would you mind if I read this tonight?”

“No, I don’t mind.” Harry said. “I’m afraid that it might not make much sense to you.” Paul smiled.

“Sounds like a lot of my university reading lists.” Paul told him. “I’ll return it tomorrow.” Paul glanced at his watch. “Whoa! We’re going to be late for dinner.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Harry asked. Paul sighed and helped Harry pack his bag up.

“No. Remember, you have art class tonight. I’ll be by your bedroom directly after to give you your sleeping pills.” Harry followed Paul to the dining room. “Your mates are looking for you.” Paul pointed out Harry’s floor.

“Hey, Secret Agent Man!” Paul smiled as Harry gave him a quick goodbye and went to join his friends. Harry was settling in fine. Petunia Dursley bent down and retrieved the mail from the floor. Bill. Bill. Tea invitation. The last letter made her stop. It was a parchment envelope addressed in bright green ink. She knew exactly who had sent the letter and opened it with a sigh as she returned to the kitchen. She sat down and slid a single page out of the envelope.

Dear Mrs. Dursley,

A week ago, I wrote to Harry, telling him that someone would come and remove him from your care to another location for the rest of the summer. Due to recent circumstances, that plan has been laid aside. I must request that you keep Harry for the rest of the summer and tell him of the change in plans. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Author’s Note: How was it? Let me know!

Author's Note: Back due to popular demand. Sorry if I kept you all waiting, but I had the worst time with Paul. He just wouldn't come out, so if he seems a little off, there is a reason. Do let me know how I am doing. All I have are character sketches and Sylvia, who is currently hiding in her bedroom, ignoring her writing completely. She'll probably kill me for telling you that, but whenever I mention writing, she gets a glazed look on her face and mumbles something about witness protection, whatever that means. So, I have had absolutely no help from her this time round, except for her character sketches. Oh well.

"Hi, Harry. How are you today?" Harry flopped onto the sofa and settled into a comfortable position.

"I'm fine. Harry said, toying with one of the pillows on the couch.

"Let's try this again. How are you?" Harry shrugged.

"Rested, I guess. I don't really know what you want to know." Harry said, tossing a pillow in the air and catching it.

"That'll work for now. I finished reading the Occlumency book last night." Paul took it off his desk and opened it. "The introduction was trying, as it spoke of nothing but how important Occlumency is. It wasn't until I was halfway through the book that I figured out that it was a lot like meditation." Harry looked up.

"Meditation? That's it?" Paul nodded. "Wow." Paul smirked and shook his head.

"Luckily, I know how to meditate and am willing to teach you, if you want me to." Harry smiled.

"That would be great, Paul." Harry said. Paul sat back and put the book back on his desk. "How do we start?" Paul leaned forward.

"First, get comfortable. I'm going to turn the lights down just the slightest bit." Harry nodded. Paul reached over to the dimmer switch and turned the lights down. "Meditation requires patience, so don't expect to get this right away. Understand?" He asked.

“Okay.” Harry rearranged himself on the couch. “Now what?”

“Close your eyes.” Harry looked a bit doubtful, but closed them. “Stay relaxed.” Harry relaxed again and waited for Paul to continue. “Focus on your breathing, Harry. Feel the way it goes in and out.” Harry did as instructed. In. Out. In. Out. “If you have any thoughts or feelings come in your mind, acknowledge them and then return your attention to your breathing. Harry nodded and took another breath. This isn’t so hard. Harry acknowledged it and went back to his breathing. Why don’t they teach this at Hogwarts? Acknowledged. In. Out. I wonder if I could teach this to Ron? Acknowledged. In. Out. Harry spent a while on his breathing, just in and out like Paul had said.

“Harry? You still with me, buddy?” Harry opened his eyes and blinked.

“Yeah, I am. That was relaxing.” Paul smiled at Harry and handed over the Occlumency book.

“I’m glad you think so. We’ll do some everyday. Practice every night before bed. It might help. Any thoughts during it?”

“Yes. Three.” Paul nodded in approval.

“Not bad, not bad at all.” He said. “You’ll get it without a problem, I’m sure.” Paul picked up a paper. “I have a report from Sky about your schoolwork.” Harry looked up. “She says you’re not interested.” Paul paused, waiting for a response. “Want to tell me why?” Paul asked. Harry shrugged.

“It’s not like I’m going to be here for long anyway. Dumbledore will find out I’m not in my aunt’s house and he’ll show up here in all his wizarding glory to take me back to Hogwarts.” Harry answered. Paul nodded, encouraging Harry to go on. Harry didn’t.

“Do you want Dumbledore to find you?” Harry nodded yes.

“Would you want to be here?” Paul let it slide. Everyone resented being at the hospital at first. Harry was no different.

“Yesterday, you didn’t sound too sure about how you felt about Dumbledore, and now you want him to find you. Conflicting views, Harry.” Harry shrugged. “Is it a desire to be away from here, or to be back with him?”

“Away from here.” Paul sat back and steeped his fingers.

“That’s understandable.” Harry stared at him.

“What?” Paul kept a comment about eloquence to himself and smiled at Harry.

“It seems that as much as you dislike this Dumbledore person, you see him as the lesser of the two evils in this situation. You don’t want to be here, but you don’t necessarily want to be with him either. If Voldemort stepped in here and offered to take you out of the hospital, would you accept his offer?” Harry face clearly questioned Paul’s sanity.

“No.” Harry said with a small shudder.

“See. You view this place as the lesser of the two evils in that situation.” Harry shrugged, trying to tell Paul he didn’t really care. “Now, about your schoolwork.” Harry looked up again.

“I told you. That doesn’t really apply to me.” Harry said, slightly exasperated. “Dumbledore will find me eventually.”

“I know, I know. Weird headmaster. How about we make a deal?” Harry looked the epitome of skeptic. “You get to add some classes you would like to take, and may not be able to take at your school, and for that, you at least maintain average in the other classes.” Harry folded his arms and bowed his head to think. What could it hurt? There were some classes here that Harry could not get anywhere else. Classes weren’t bad, but he hated starting something

he couldn't finish. It gnawed at him and wouldn't leave him alone until he did complete it. Then again, he could see Paul's argument. It kept him busy, that was for sure.

"Okay." Harry agreed. Paul gave him a wide smile and pulled out a class list.

"Anything in particular that you want to study?" Harry looked at the class list.

"You have foreign languages?" He asked. Paul flipped to the right page and pointed. Hmm, toss up between French and Spanish. He chewed his bottom lip. "Spanish." He told Paul. Paul wrote it down and paused.

"You've already joined the art club, so no art classes are needed. Same thing, really. How about a physical education class?" Harry gaped at him.

"You mean running laps and push-ups? No way." Paul smirked and shook his head.

"Why don't we go check it out now? There's a class starting in just a few minutes. Once you see what it is, you can decide to run for the hills or not." Harry sighed and agreed. After all, it was best to give everything a chance at least once, unless you were being held against your will in a Muggle mental hospital. Paul returned Harry's Occlumency book and stood up. Harry followed. "Harry, if I ask for your opinion in the future, I fully expect you to give it to me, even if you feel I won't approve of what you have to say." Harry looked up at him. "Try to think of me as a friend, someone you can say anything to and expect them to accept it." Paul noticed Harry thinking hard.

"Even if I say that I hate it here?" Harry asked. Paul smiled.

"Yes! Even if you say you hate it here. I won't take offense to your feelings, buddy. Feel free to do everything but insult my intelligence. Ignorance, especially in your case, will happen. Just fill me in on what I am missing. I'm still here for you, not for what you think will make

me happy.” Harry considered this information. He could say anything, no matter what? Well, he had seen it in action the day before, when he had talked about Voldemort and the dreams. That hadn’t been awkward. It just happened.

“I’ll try.” Harry whispered, promising to do his best. Paul sounded so much like...do NOT think about it!

“That’s all I ask.” Paul answered. He launched into the history of the school, outlining the noble ideas of the trustees. Harry listened half-heartedly, working hard to not think about something he was afraid to even face in his nightmares. “Here we are.” Harry looked up and blinked. He had been deep in thought. “It looks like the class is warming up.” Paul opened the door and Harry followed him inside. Harry took in the clothes, the floor, the mats, and realized that he knew what this was. It was a martial arts class of some kind. He had no idea what style it was, but he did have a vague idea that he would absolutely love this class. Wait a minute. Girls!

Harry had known that there were girls in the school, but their floors were on the opposite side of the school. They didn’t really interact, as classes were not co-educational. He had really only seen girls in the dining hall, and then he had stayed with his own floor, as had everyone else. Were the girls allowed to have this class with the boys? Yes, they were. A whole mess of boys came from a door and stood beside the girls. Wow. Harry looked over to Paul to find the man talking to a man in the uniform. The man looked over at Harry, as though he knew that Harry had been staring. Harry dropped his eyes out of instinct, finding the floor fascinating. Some kind of straw mats, hmm. Snape could take a few lessons from this guy.

“This is Evan.” Paul said, putting a hand on his shoulder. Harry looked up and offered his hand as Paul introduced him. “Evan, Sensei Leonard.”

“You’ve been in fights before.” It wasn’t a question. Harry blinked. How in the world had he known? “You play a sport. One that makes impact with the ground. You have an odd callous on your right hand.”

Sensei Leonard circled him. "Hmm. That's interesting. You start tomorrow." With those words, Sensei Leonard walked away. Harry stared after him, wondering what had just happened. He looked to Paul for explanation.

"His nickname among the staff is Holmes for good reason." He told Harry, leading him out of the room.

"Holmes?" Harry questioned. That sounded familiar, but he couldn't figure out why. He hadn't heard that in years.

"Sherlock Holmes." It clicked then.

"The detective?" Paul nodded.

"One in the same. Look him up next time you're in the library. I think you'll like him. He has odd little quirks." Harry thought that knowing about his 'little quirks' might improve his chances with Sensei Leonard. "Remember your journal writing?" Harry nodded. "I want you to keep up with it." Paul told him. "Use it before and after your meditation." Harry stopped.

"Why?" He asked.

"Just humor me. I think it will help you to figure some things out. Try it for, oh, two weeks, and then if it doesn't work, you can stop." Harry decided that that wasn't too unreasonable.

"Okay." Harry agreed. Paul cleared his throat. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"If you ever feel particularly distressed about anything, make a note of it and tell me about it. If it's bad enough, send someone for me. I've got your back while you're here."

I've got your back. Someone to watch his back, to help him, protect him, defend him. It sounded like the Defense Association. His breath caught while he fought down memories he didn't want to remember.

He couldn't remember. "Hey, buddy?" Harry took a deep breath and looked up. "Where did you go?" Harry shook his head.

"No where." Paul sighed. He wouldn't get anything else out of Harry right now.

"Alright. Your literature class is going to be starting soon." Harry nodded and went towards his classroom. Literature would take his mind off things. Literature was safe. Paul watched him go, a small frown on his face. Something had upset Harry. Paul had no idea what it was and it bothered him. How was he going to get through to him?

Harry sat in class and tried to focus. The lecture was not helping at all. He almost cheered aloud when the teacher told them they could read silently for the rest of the period. He took out a fresh sheet of paper. He would write to Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

Thank you, thank you, thank you! I may never be able to repay you enough for your visit and the Occlumency book. Tell your mother thanks for the brownies. I gave one to Paul, but please don't tell her. She might kill me. Paul and I made a deal about my classes. Basically, I agree to apply myself in all of them, and I get to take classes I want to take. I added Spanish and a martial arts class. Want to know something really strange (well, as strange as a wizard and witch will find it)? The teacher knew that I had been in fights before and that I played a sport that had a lot of crashing into the ground. Freaky, huh? Paul says his nickname is "Holmes", though I doubt anyone would attempt to call that to his face. Snape could take lessons on intimidation from this man. I wonder how he knew? Don't worry, I'm writing in the journal you gave me. Paul loves the idea and wants to continue. It's actually kind of relaxing. Paul read the Occlumency book (I hope you don't mind that he got to read it before you) and said it was a lot like meditation. He's teaching me now. I have to practice before I go to sleep. Sound familiar? I will practice. Paul is not Snape. Is there any chance of you contacting the old crowd and telling them where I am? Please write back soon.

Love,

Harry

Three days later...

Dear Hermione,

This is going to be a short letter. I will write you one soon, but I'm about to leave the house and Mum's screaming at me to hurry up. Dumbledore sent me a letter, telling me that I've been accepted to a Summer Studies program at Hogwarts. The explanatory letter mentions that I'm going to be learning advanced Defense spells and teamwork and a few other things I really shouldn't mention. I'm surprised you didn't get one too. I'm disappointed that neither you nor Harry will be there. I've got to go now, but I'll write back when I have more information about what, exactly, I will be doing. Oh, geez, Mum's having kittens!

Bye!

Ron

Hermione stared at the letter she had just received. Summer studies program? Hogwarts didn't usually offer such a thing, she was sure of it. Summer studies only happened under certain circumstances. She plucked her copy of *Hogwarts: A History* off the shelf and looked at the index. Summer studies. She turned to the correct page.

The Summer Studies is a rare occurrence in the school. This program is usually offered during times of great stress, such as war or epidemics. The most popular time is during war, as this allows the staff of Hogwarts to teach advanced techniques that may save lives and the school. This happened last during the war against the Dark Lord Grindelwald. The students are usually chosen by the headmaster or the deputy and for specific reasons and purposes. Not much is known about the program. Further inquiries should be sent to the headmaster of Hogwarts.

Hermione scowled. Not much help there. Why would the Summer Studies program start up now? "Think, Hermione!" She stood and paced her room. Summer studies programs only happened during time of war or epidemics. "Okay, anything that threatens both muggle and wizard communities." She turned and paced the other way. "So, there must be something that children can do that adult wizards cannot in this current war. What would that be?" She paced the other way, trying to figure it out. "Something children can do but adult wizards cannot. There isn't much." She threw herself onto her bed and looked up at the ceiling. Her glow in the dark stars decorated the ceiling, reminding her of the descriptions of Firenze's classroom. "What can children do that adults can not?" She mumbled, feet on the wall while her hair hung off the edge of the bed. "Something children can do but adults cannot." She folded her hands on her stomach and sighed.

"Hermione?" She looked over to her door to see her mother standing there. "Something the matter, dear?" Hermione rolled off her bed and stood up.

"Is there something that children can do that adults cannot?" Her mother blinked in surprise.

"There are a number of things that children can do that adults cannot. Why do you ask?" She came in and sat down on the bed, pulling Hermione down with her.

"Ron sent me a letter about a Summer Studies program. The only time that the school holds these is during times of danger. You know that there is a war going on, I told you that." Dr. Granger nodded. "Well, logic is saying that there is something that is going on that children wizards can do that adult wizards cannot. I can't figure out what it is. What do you know of?" Hermione asked.

"Well, let's see. Children tell the truth at the most inopportune times." Dr. Granger said, smiling at her daughter. "They see things others don't, especially adults. They have an intuitive sense about them, especially when they know someone is looking for them. They are usually overlooked by even the most observant. Underestimated,

I'm sure. Children bring out the best and worst in people. I think that's about it. Did it help?" She asked, putting an arm around Hermione.

"I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know. Thanks, Mum." Dr. Granger nodded.

"Not a problem, dear. Oh, you received a letter from Harry in the post." Hermione smiled and thanked her mother, ripping the envelope open. She pulled out the sheet of notebook and smiled. "If he wants anything, just let me know. I'll be downstairs."

"Okay, Mum. Thanks." Hermione read the letter through once. She giggled at the description of the martial arts teacher. Holmes? That she had to witness for herself. Nope, no chance of her contacting the Order, sorry, Harry. Snape taking lessons. That was funny. She hopped off her bed and went to the desk to reply to Harry's letter. She was halfway done when her head snapped up. "That's it!"

Author's Note: Again, waiting patiently for your feedback. I hope you liked it.

Disclaimer: I'm not sure if I have ever put up a disclaimer, so here it is now: I do not own anything owned by JK Rowling. I am not making any money, though I'd be happy to ghostwrite for her if she asked me.

Author's Note: I'm back! Nice to see all the wonderful reviews. They do help me write this, so please take the time to give me some constructive criticism if you have any suggestions. The review can only help to improve the story. Thanks to everyone who reviewed the last chapter!

Harry opened his eyes and found himself staring into Jack's face. "Gah!" Harry jerked back away from him. Jack raised a party noisemaker to his mouth and blew. "Jack, what are you doing?" Harry asked, pulling the blankets over his head and burying his face in his pillow.

'Good morning, 007.'" Harry rolled his eyes. "Our informants have told us that your birthday is today."

"Yeah. So?" Harry asked, trying to get further into the bed. He was so comfortable and bed seemed like the best place for him.

"So, you know what that means?" Harry poked his head out from under his blanket and eyed Jack.

"Another secret mission?" He asked, wondering when Jack would go away.

"Cake and ice cream." Hack answered. "Hurry and get dressed." Harry groaned and went back under the blanket, curling into a ball to preserve the warmth. He just wanted to stay in bed. "I know its Saturday, but you have to get up." Harry groaned again and sat up.

"All right. I'm up." He folded his arms and looked at Jack. "I'm certainly not going to get dressed with you in here." Jack disappeared through the door and shut it behind him. Harry toiled out of bed and started pulling on his uniform. It was more comfortable than his Hogwarts uniform, only a polo shirt and khaki slacks. The shirt didn't even need to be tucked in. He left it loose, decided that his hair was a

hopeless cause, and pulled on a pair of trainers. Jack and his entire floor were waiting for him. He stopped when he saw that all of them had slightly evil grins. "What?" He ducked as handfuls of confetti were tossed at his head.

"Happy Birthday!" Harry smiled and attempted to clear some of the confetti from his hair.

"Thanks, guys." He said sincerely. Bug reached out and helped to clear the confetti.

"You don't think that's it, do you?" Bug said, grinning at Harry.

"There's more?" Bug didn't answer, for his face told Harry everything he needed to know. Merlin, there was more. The entire floor walked down to the dining hall together, everyone talking at once about the party that evening. Harry stayed quiet. He couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"Waffles!" Bug pulled Harry to their table. "Whenever a floor has a birthday here, they get waffles for breakfast and a pizza party and cake and ice cream that night, along with a movie. We celebrate birthdays here." Harry nodded. A birthday party. That sounded like fun. Bug took charge of the plate of waffles and doled them out equally. Harry thought that Ron was a big eater until he had come here. Everyone, well, except Sparky, loved to eat. He decided it was because they were all teenagers. Harry jumped in surprise as a paper crown landed on his head.

"You've got to be kidding me." He said, reaching up to take it off. The entire table protested.

"You need to keep it on." Sparky said. "It's tradition." Harry decided it wasn't worth arguing over. He slouched down in his chair and started eating his waffle, fending off Bug's efforts to give him another one. He had three already, thank you. They were just finishing up when Paul started over.

“Hey, Sparky!” Sparky looked up from his plate. “I need someone to keep this for me until later. I was thinking you could wear it because you ate two whole waffles in celebration. You know, share in the fun.” Sparky smiled.

“Sure, Evan.” Harry reached over and put the crown on Sparky’s head. Sparky grinned. Harry didn’t need to be told that that had been the right move.

“Hey, buddy.” Harry looked up and smiled at Paul. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” Harry finished his juice and stood up. “I’ll see you guys later.” His entire floor gave a loud good-bye.

“Hey, 007!” Harry looked at Chef. Chef didn’t speak often, but Harry liked him. Chef’s favorite hobby was cooking, so his nickname was apt. “What movie do you want to watch tonight?” Harry thought about it. He didn’t know many movies, thanks to the Dursleys. Oh, Hermione had mentioned one.

“Um, Star Wars?” Chef smiled and nodded.

“A classic. We’ll see you then!” Harry waved and followed Paul out of the dining.

“Star Wars?” Paul asked. Harry shrugged.

“Hermione recommended it. Thought it would be a good idea.”

“You know that there are three, right?” Harry shook his head. “Well, maybe we’ll fit in the other two later. How about a walk outside?” Outside. Harry thought about it. No twinges from Voldemort. He felt his wand under his pant leg. Yeah, he could go outside.

“Sure.” Paul led Harry outside and Harry stopped just outside the door, looking around for anything dangerous. Paul waited patiently, as though he knew what Harry was doing. “Okay.” Harry moved to Paul’s side and they started out on the path.

“How are you, Harry?” Paul asked. Harry bit back a ‘fine’, his usual answer, and smiled a little bit.

“Well-rested. Jack had to fight to get me out of bed; though that noisemaker might end up somewhere he doesn’t want it if he does that again.” Paul laughed. Note to self: wake Harry up from doorway in future. “I haven’t had a Voldemort dream since you started giving me sleeping pills.”

“Yes, we’ll have to be careful so that you don’t develop a dependency. Those are only temporary until we get this Occlumency stuff down.” Paul leaned against a tree, while Harry sat down on a handy bench. “I’d like to return to something you said earlier.” Harry looked up at him and nodded. “You mentioned that Voldemort makes those dreams comfortable, soothing, and calm. Everything that your life is not. Why don’t you tell me about that?”

“My life? What do you want to know?” He asked. There were so many places to start.

“You’re famous, right?” Harry’s scowl gave Paul his answer. “Tell me about that.” Harry folded his arms. Oh, where to start?

“Well, let’s see. I lived with Muggle relatives for eleven years. I didn’t know I was famous. There were always strange people, strange-looking people, coming up to me on the street and shaking my hand, staring. One even bowed. I, of course, had no idea what they were on about. When I was told what happened, I learned that the only reason I was famous was because I didn’t die when I was supposed to and Voldemort disappeared. Some thought he was dead. I was one year old when that happened. Famous for something I can’t remember and I had not done.” Paul sat down with Harry, motioning for him to continue.

“Once I went to the wizarding world, well, that was different. It was like a movie star just showing up on the street. Mobs. People shaking my hand. Women crying over me. That was frightening.” Paul smiled. Harry could manage a shell-shocked face when he wanted to. “Once

I went to Hogwarts, the students were all very happy to see me. They stared, whispered about me. It wasn't too bad the first year." Harry paused.

"Second year, well, that was different. It started out oddly. When I went for school supplies, I managed to land in the newspapers. Gilderoy Lockhart was a famous author and he was there that day in the bookshop. When the newspaper photographer saw me there, he grabbed me and put me next to Lockhart and started taking pictures. The pictures later showed me trying to get out of the picture. Once school started, Lockhart started giving me advice on how to handle fame, giving autographs, fans, stuff like that. I couldn't stand the man or his advice. I didn't want anyone sending me fan mail. Now or ever."

"People in school were getting attacked, petrified, by something in the school. The 'Heir of Slytherin' had come back. People found out that I can speak Parseltongue." Harry smiled at the look on Paul's face. "Snake language. I can talk to snakes."

"That is so cool." Paul said. "I am so jealous. I have a snake and sometimes I wish I knew what he was thinking." Harry smiled.

"If you bring him into your office, I could tell you." Paul sat back, a contented look on his face.

"I'll do that." Paul looked at Harry. "So, was this Parseltongue a bad thing?"

"I don't think so. I didn't even know I could do it until then. Everyone else thought that I was the one attacking the students. Except for Snape and most of the teaching staff." Harry paused. "That was really odd."

"Who's Snape?" Harry pulled a face.

"Potions Master. He hates me." Paul looked like he was going to object. "No, really. He hates me." Paul dropped it.

"Then what happened?" Harry shrugged.

“Rumors, suspicion. The usual.” The usual? Harry had had that happen more than once? “Once Ron and I went to the Chamber of Secrets, where the monster was, and rescued his sister, all was forgiven, and Lockhart lost his memory because of a charm he tried to use on Ron and I.” Harry laughed.

“You know, everyone thinks that I’m some powerful wizard.” Paul sat up.

“Are you?” Harry shrugged.

“Now, that depends on who you ask.” Harry said, relaxing back on the bench. “Almost everyone will say yes. I don’t think so. Voldemort marked me as his equal.” He gestured to his scar.

“Is that some magical tradition?” Harry smirked.

“I wish. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal...but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...And either must die at the hand of the other, for neither can live while the other survives...The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.” Paul looked at him, perplexed by the words. “It’s a prophecy.” Harry explained. “About me.”

“So, what does it mean?” Harry smirked.

“Well, according to Dumbledore, either I kill Voldemort or he kills me.” Paul held his breath. Surely, the headmaster had not said that. “So, if I want to survive, I’ve got to become a murderer.” Harry had taken on his usual position when he was upset. He was pacing. “Why did it have to be me?”

“Was there someone else to fit the prophecy?” Harry nodded.

“A boy named Neville. Voldemort thought that I was the bigger threat.” Harry sat down again and sighed. “I don’t want any more blood on my hands.” Paul looked at Harry. He had not meant to say that last part aloud.

“Are you sure that you are required to kill him?” Paul asked. “That prophecy said you are marked as his equal, but would have a power that Voldemort wouldn’t or couldn’t know about.” Harry nodded. “It could just be telling you that you inspire a certain person to fight, or your society to band together, or something similar.” Paul looked at Harry, seeing that Harry wanted to believe that idea.

“What about the ‘neither can live while the other exists’ part?” Paul shrugged.

“Have you lived like a normal kid?” Harry shook his head. “Well, when he dies, your life will be normal. I think that’s what that part means.” Harry pulled his feet up and thought it over. It made sense, just as much sense as Dumbledore’s explanation. “What do you think?”

“It makes sense.” Harry told him. “Much more sense than me having to kill him.” Paul smiled and pulled Harry’s feet down.

“Why don’t we go with that interpretation then? You, Harry Potter, average kid, super powerful wizard.” Harry gave him a look. “What?” Paul asked. “Voldemort picked you as his equal. Let’s face it. You’re doomed to be powerful.” Paul said in mock seriousness that reminded Harry of the Weasley twins. Harry snorted.

“I’ll confirm that suspicion when I get my OWL scores.” Paul nodded.

“Sure thing, buddy. Oh, excuse me, powerful wizard.” Harry glared.

“If I’m so powerful, why aren’t you afraid of me?” Paul smirked and threw an arm around Harry’s shoulders.

“I’m too lovable to hurt, Harry. You knew that.” Paul got to his feet and pulled Harry to his own. “Come on. I have something for you in my office.” Harry tried to find out what it was, but Paul wouldn’t tell him a thing. Harry almost beat Paul to his office and flopped on the couch once Paul opened the door. “I know you love chocolate, so here you go. Just don’t eat it all at once.” Paul pulled out a colorful bag and put it next to Harry. “Happy Birthday.”

“You didn’t have to.” Harry told him. Paul waved off the comment.

“I wanted to. Come on, open it!” Harry opened the bag and saw several bars of chocolate and a book. He pulled out the book and looked at it. It was a journal. “You’re about halfway through your other one. I figured you might need another.” Harry smiled.

“Thanks, Paul. It’s cool.” Instead of the leather bound ragged edges like the one from Hermione, it was spiral bound and had black paper. “Er.”

“Oh, right. There should be a pack of pens in there.” Harry dug in the bag and found them. He picked out a green pen and wrote on the inside cover. “Wicked.” Harry showed Paul his name. Paul took the pen and wrote something next to it. “Super Powerful Wizard.” Harry shook his head in amusement.

“If anyone sees that, I’m holding you responsible.” Paul smiled.

“Sure thing.” Paul checked the clock. “I do believe that it’s time for your martial arts lesson.” Harry looked at the clock and leapt to his feet.

“Give a guy some warning! Thanks for everything, Paul.” Harry rushed from the office and took off running for the gym. Paul sat back in his chair, mind going over everything he had heard.

Author's Note: Thanks for reading.

Author's Note: Well, my papers were finished. Sylvia and I have the same classes, so when she's swamped, I'm swamped. It's done. I received a perfect score. Thank you to all who wished me luck with them. Also, to everyone who reviewed, you guys are awesome. You encourage me to keep going, even when Sylvia is off in her own little Hogwarts world and neglects me. "I'm talking to YOU, Sylvia!" Thanks for all the help, guys. I do appreciate it.

Harry changed in record time and made it to the floor in time to stretch with the rest of the class. Sensei eyed him, but didn't comment. Harry now felt comfortable in the class and eagerly lined up at Sensei's direction. They were going to do break falls, which was just a fancy way of saying "how to fall without hurting yourself". Harry stood in line and waited for his turn. He had found something he was good at, and more importantly, did not require magic. He remembered when he had first learned how to break fall. He had been rather nervous, but Sensei found a way to help him.
(Flashback)

"Evan. Stay after." Sensei said to Harry as the class ended. Evan waited while the rest of the class filed out. Rick smiled at him, so he doubted that Sensei was going to yell at him. Sensei pulled out a mat and called him over. "On your knees." Harry knelt and fought to stay that way. He couldn't see where Sensei or Rick was standing. A hand pushed him forward and he caught himself as he fell. Sensei grunted. "Rick." Rick came over and ruffled Harry's hair. "Most injuries," Sensei knelt down next to Harry, "happen when you catch yourself as you hit the ground. Broken hand, wrist, elbow." Sensei looked Harry in the eyes. "I'm going to teach you how to fall without hurting yourself." Harry nodded uneasily. Rick knelt next to Harry. "We are going to help you until you get the hang of the position you need." Help him? Help him how? Hands closed over his wrists and he stiffened.

"Relax, Evan." Sensei's voice counseled. "Relaxation is important." Harry took a deep breath and tried to follow his directions.

"Don't hyperventilate." Rick said, laying a hand on Harry's shoulder.

“We won’t hurt you, Evan.” Sensei told him, turning Harry’s face toward him.

“I know,” Harry said.

“You know, but you don’t trust us. Yet.” Harry tried to pull away, but Sensei’s grip kept him from moving. “I will not hurt you. You need to learn how to do this if you want to continue the class.” Sensei said, meeting Harry’s eyes. Harry wondered when he had started shaking. “Please let me show you.” Sensei sat there with Harry while he tried to come to a decision. He had no idea how long they waited, but Harry had a feeling it was a while.

“Okay.” He said. Sensei gave him a brief smile as Harry held out his hands.

“Turn your head to the side. We’ll control your fall. Breathe out on impact. We’ll keep you from hurting yourself.” Sensei paused. “Relax.” Harry nodded.

“No, I’ve changed my mind. I definitely do not to do this. I can’t do this!” Harry felt himself hit the mat. “Oof!”

“You forgot to breathe out. Let’s do it again.” Harry felt himself lifted off the floor and back onto his knees. Harry found that each fall became easier. “Good!” Since that day, he could not only break fall, but enjoyed doing it. Everyone else called him crazy.

Sensei gave Harry a small smile as Harry stepped up. Harry held out his arm and Sensei took a firm hold. Harry felt himself tossed. He rolled when he hit the mat and popped up in a fighting stance. “Good!” Sensei called out. “Back of the line.” Harry jogged to the back of the line. “Front rolls!” Harry grinned. He loved this class. He heard the door open behind him but didn’t look. It was almost his turn, and Sensei demanded a focused attention at all times when on the floor. Too many injuries came from carelessness. He rolled and popped up. As he was returning to the back of the line, he saw his Aunt Petunia and Hermione standing near the door. He nodded to them and rejoined the line. Rick hopped out of line and steered the two of them

to seats out of the way of the students. Harry forgot about their presence as class went on.

“Rei!” Harry bowed with the rest of the class and turned for the locker room.

“Evan!” Harry turned and saw Hermione. Oh yeah. He smiled and allowed Hermione to tackle him in a hug. “Ugh, you’re all sweaty!” She said, pulling away.

“Sorry.” He said. “Hello, Aunt Petunia.”

“Go get changed. Hermione and I are taking you out for a while.” Harry smiled, thanked her, and dashed to the locker room. He took a quick shower and found Rick waiting for him.

“Hey, kid. There’s this beautiful girl out there, and she gave me this bag for you.” Harry smiled. “I don’t know if I should give it to you. Its clothes and you might be better looking than me if I let you have them.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“You’re a lady killer, Rick. Please, just give me the bag.” I stand no chance.” Rick handed the bag over with a “we’ll see” look and headed for the shower himself. Harry wondered why Hermione felt the need to bring him clothes, but decided to try them anyway. He pulled them on and found a green shirt, black jeans, socks, and shoes. Like black, Hermione? He faced himself in the mirror.

“Un-tuck the shirt.” Rick said from behind him. “Much better.” Rick circled him. “No. It’s the hair. Come here.” Rick went over to his locker and pulled out a jar. “Try some of that in your hair.” Harry eyed it. “Oh, here. Watch.” Rick took some in his hands and ran it through his hair. Harry mimicked his movements with the gel. Rick pulled out a hair dryer and started drying Harry’s hair.

“Ack! Rick! This isn’t necessary! People are waiting.” Rick pushed Harry onto the bench.

“Quit squirming. Sensei’s entertaining them. You have an extra minute.” Harry sighed and let Rick continue. Sensei did love visitors. “Okay, come here.” Rick led Harry to the mirrors. “Use a brush on gelled hair. Brush the top like this.” Rick stepped back and smiled. “No more bird’s nest. Man, I’ve wanted to do that to you since day one.” Harry pushed Rick away when Rick threw an arm around his shoulders. “You’ll thank me later.” Rick said. “Roll your sleeves almost up to your elbows and you might be able to compete.” Rick did not let him leave the locker room until he rolled his sleeves.

“I have to go!” Harry said, dashing from the locker room when Rick tried to tweak his hair.

“Unbutton the top button!” Rick called after him. Note to self: Stay far away from Rick when it comes time to start dating. You’ll never leave the bathroom.

“Whoa! Julie, look!” Harry saw two girls staring at him. “I saw him first!” The first girl, Harry remembered that her name was Michelle, said to Julie. Harry jumped as Hermione’s arms went around him.

“Told you he had a girlfriend, Shell!” Julie said. Harry blushed. “You had my hopes up!” She complained to her friend. Michelle pointed at Harry when she saw that he was looking at her. Julie squeaked, turned red, and started pulling Michelle from the room.

“Friends of yours, Harry?” Hermione asked as she released him from her hug.

“Not yet.” He said, fighting the flush from his face. “Sorry to keep you, but Rick wouldn’t let me leave until he did something to my hair and he had to approve how I put this on.” He gestured to the clothes. “Did you pick this out?”

“I helped. Your aunt and I did.” Petunia came over and smiled at him.

“Hello. Happy Birthday.” Harry nodded. “Ready to get out for a while?”

“More than. Thank you for the clothes, Aunt Petunia.” Petunia nodded stiffly.

“Let’s go, you two. I hope you’re hungry.” Petunia took them to restaurant in the neighboring city. Harry was allowed to order anything he wanted at Petunia’s insistence. “Your uncle and cousin told me to tell you “Happy Birthday”. Dudley and Vernon are at the doctor’s office.” Harry nodded. The meal passed quickly for them, filled with Hermione’s chatter about O. W. L. scores. “That reminds me.” Petunia took out a parchment envelope. Harry’s mouth went dry. “One of two I have for you.” Harry reached out with a shaking hand and took it. He stared at the official seal and took a sip of water.

“Go on, Harry.” Hermione urged. Harry took a deep breath and slid a finger under the seal and broke it. He skipped the congratulatory letter and looked at the next sheet. “How’d you do?” Hermione asked. Harry turned pale as he stared at the sheet. “It can’t be that bad!” Hermione said, straining to see the sheet.

“I don’t know what you did to me last year, Hermione, but it worked.” Harry said. “I passed everything. Nine. I’ve got nine OWLS.” Hermione squealed and hugged him while he passed the note to Aunt Petunia. “Snape’s going to kill me. I’ve gotten into his class.”

“An ‘O’ in Potions? How did you manage that?” Harry shrugged.

“No idea, but he’s going to kill me.” Hermione smiled and hugged Harry again. Harry sat back in the seat and thought about his scores. True, he had just managed in Astronomy, Divination, and History of Magic with Acceptable. Herbology had an Exceeds Expectations, while Defense Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Care of Magical Creatures, Potions, and Transfiguration all earned Outstandings. What had happened?

“Five Os, one E, and three As. Those are great scores, Harry!” Hermione said, hugging him again.

“Thank you, thank you. I know I’m brilliant.” Harry said, mostly to get her from around his neck. He grinned as it worked and Hermione promptly smacked him behind the head. “Ow.” He complained.

“Your mother had the same amount.” Petunia told him, handing back the parchment. Harry was shocked that she had just offered information about his mother. “She was very surprised. She had beaten a friend of hers by one.”

Conversation drifted to school subjects at St. Jude’s. Hermione offered any and all of her assistance with finding information Harry felt was lacking in his education as well as her services as a tutor. “That’s what Sky is for.” Harry complained. Hermione could only smile. She loved teasing her friends about their schoolwork. Harry did manage to surprise himself by admitting that he liked the classes offered and that he wished Hogwarts offered some of them.

After lunch, Petunia dragged the two teenagers to the optometrist. She said it had been quite a while since his last check-up. Harry refrained from commenting on her remark and followed. He was more than surprised when she let Harry pick out a new pair of frames and ordered contact lenses for his prescription.

“I talked her into the contacts.” Hermione whispered while Petunia spoke to the eye doctor. “She mentioned taking you to the eye doctor and I said that you would look older in a different pair of glasses and that contacts wouldn’t break if you continued to be clumsy. We both know the kinds of accidents you get in to.” Harry thought about it and gave an evil grin.

“Old Snake Face won’t know what hit him.” He said to Hermione. She matched his grin with one of her own.

“I know.” Harry elected to wear his new glasses out and kept wondering who the strange boy was every time he passed a window. Once they returned to the car, Petunia decided that all three of them needed ice cream and started for the nearest shop. Harry gave scared faces about his aunt’s behavior and Hermione found herself stifling giggles. She slapped Harry on the arm several times in

between gasps for air from her silent laughter. "You're horrible." Harry only shrugged.

Once in the parlor, Hermione and Petunia both produced gifts for Harry. Harry stared at the three boxes in front of him, unsure of how to proceed. His aunt and uncle, as well as his cousin, had given him a gift? He decided to start easy and open Hermione's first. Harry opened the box to find two packs of drawing pencils and several pads of drawing paper. Hermione, true to form, had also included a book of drawing tips. "Thanks, Hermione." Harry said, giving her a hug.

"You're welcome. I'll encourage any hobby that doesn't involve Bludgers." She said with a smile.

"I like hobbies with Bludgers." Harry answered. He turned to the two remaining packages.

"One is from Dudley and Vernon, the other from me." Hermione gave him a sharp kick under the table.

"Thank you." Harry was afraid that the gifts were going to be something along the lines of a tissue or coat hanger. He didn't want Hermione to witness this. He opened the one from Dudley and Vernon first. He was surprised to find two books. One was called The Art of War and the other Jeet Kun Do. Harry found a note sticking out of the first one.

Hi Harry.

I've been going to a doctor too. I've realized a lot of things in just the last two weeks. I was wondering if we could write each other? Just write me at home if you do. Dad and I picked out these books because Mum said you were studying karate or something. Well, hope you like them.

Happy Birthday!

Dudley

Harry knew that at that moment, he had officially entered an alternate universe. He wondered if Voldemort wore pink bunny slippers and ran a Muggle orphanage in this one. That would be highly amusing. Harry slid the note back into the book. He needed to think about it. The other present could only get worse. He opened it and blinked in surprise when he saw a bunch of small books. Journals.

"They're mine." Petunia told him. "So you can understand." Harry wasn't quite sure what Aunt Petunia wanted him to understand, but thanked her anyway. After they finished their ice cream, Aunt Petunia took them back to the hospital. Harry had hoped that his things would have been gathered while they were gone and he would be going back to Privet Drive. He was disappointed to find that that was not the case.

"Listen to your doctor. I'll be by for a visit next month." Petunia gave him a quick one-armed squeeze and left after signing him back in. Hermione asked if she and Harry could go outside and the nurse on duty said that that was fine, so long as they stayed in sight of the window. Hermione dragged him to a bench and sat down.

"I thought she was going to take me back to Privet Drive." Harry said, putting his presents down. "When are your parents coming?" He asked. Hermione pulled her legs up.

"Another hour or so." Hermione shrugged.

"It's dangerous out here." Harry said, motioning back to the hospital.

"No, it's not. Aurors are protecting you on the Continent." Harry looked at her self-contented smile.

"And where did they get that idea?" Hermione laughed.

"Bravo, Harry. I have a bug in a jar and I also have an acquaintance with a girl whose father is the editor of the Quibbler. A few well-placed words took care of everything." Harry rolled his eyes.

“Ah, Hermione. Ron and I have corrupted you beyond all reason. You should have been in Slytherin.” Hermione slapped his arm and snorted.

“Slytherin?” She asked. “That’s horrible.” Harry grinned.

“Ron said you were scary. Brilliant, but scary.” Hermione shrugged again and toyed with her hair.

“He’s right.” She said after a few seconds. “I am brilliant.”

“Careful, Mi. Your ego will knock me off the bench.” Hermione missed the nickname but glared at Harry for the ego comment. “Wow. You’ve been taking lessons from Snape. Hermione Death Glare.” Harry hid his face behind his hands. Hermione responded in the only way possible. She messed up his hair.

“Rick is going to be so mad at you. He spent a few minutes on it, to make it perfect.” Harry tried to smooth it back in place. He had actually liked his hair today.

“He’ll get over it.” Hermione paused. “I received a letter from Ron.” She sighed. “I have something to tell you, but please don’t get mad.”

“Mad about what?” Harry asked, looking at her face. It was very important, whatever it was.

“Ron wrote me about being asked to spend the rest of the summer at Hogwarts, as a summer studies student.” Harry went numb. How could Dumbledore do this? Harry had asked to stay at school every summer. Why? “I did some research and found that the summer studies program is never used unless certain students need training in something special, extra-curricular.” Harry nodded. He followed what she was saying. “Ron included a list. Every person on the list, except one, was in the DA.” Hermione told him. “Ron mentioned something about them being like Junior Aurors.” How dare Dumbledore do this? Harry took a deep breath like Paul had taught him and sighed.

“Who was the one not in the DA?” He asked.

“Draco Malfoy.” Harry lost control of his jaw. He made a mental note to pick it up from the ground as soon as he ranted.

“That pompous, arrogant...” Words failed him as he attempted to understand that idea. Dumbledore had allowed Malfoy to come to the castle and not Harry? “Why?” he asked, trying, but not succeeding, to keep the hurt out of his voice.

“I’m not sure. Not quite.” Hermione told him, rubbing his back. “I have an idea, though.” Harry looked up. “It’s just an idea.” She said, seeing his face. “I think that Dumbledore is making them into bodyguards for you.” Hermione wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“He’s endangering my friends, whether he’s training them or not.” Harry said woodenly. “Don’t expect me to believe that Dumbledore is doing ‘what he feels is best’, Mi.” He told Hermione. “Please don’t.”

“I wasn’t. I don’t agree with it either. Defense is one thing, but training them for this?” She shook her head. “I don’t like it.”

“Good. I’m tired of him meddling with my life.” The two teenagers sat in silence, each in their own thoughts, until Hermione’s parents came. “Take care, Mi.” Harry said, hugging her.

“I hate nicknames.” She informed him. “You take care, okay? Write me?”

“I will. Oh wait.” Harry grabbed his school reading list and handed it to Hermione. “Will you pick up my school books?” He asked.

“Sure. You can pay me back later. I know you’re good for it. I’ll bring them to you here, so you can get started.” She told him.

“Don’t your parents get tired of bringing you here?” He asked.

“No. They encourage it.” She hugged him and gave a quick goodbye. Harry waved until she was gone and went back in the hospital. He said good afternoon to the nurse on duty and went up to his room to put his gifts away. Today had been surreal. New glasses, contacts, presents, and ice cream with his aunt and best friend. Surreal. He lined the books up on the shelves and put the art supplies in his desk. He had some time to kill, so he picked one of Aunt Petunia’s journals and started reading. Dudley. Joys of motherhood. Challenges of getting bottles clean. Not much to read, actually.

When he reached the date of his parents’ death, he perked up and read faster. November the second gave him what he was looking for.

It’s happened. My sister met her end from that horrible wizard. She died. I

warned her that nothing good would come of her magic. Now she’s dead.

My nephew appeared on the doorstep, as though placed there by her magic.

It’s not fair. He should still have parents. He’s here beside me. He’s such

a quiet baby. I wonder if he remembers what he has seen? He looks like his

father, with black hair that will be messy one day, no doubt. His eyes are Lily’s.

I feel like she’s watching me.

Dumbledore wrote a note telling me to explain what happened to Harry when he

is old enough to understand. When is a child old enough to understand that an

evil wizard killed his parents and then tried to kill him? Two? Three? Eight?

How can I tell him that his parents were murdered? Killed? In front of him?

How can I tell him that he is a wizard? How in the world am I going to raise

a magic child?

Harry closed the journal and considered what he had read. Aunt Petunia sounded scared. He looked up when he heard someone knock.

“Hey, kiddo.” Harry smiled and put the book on the shelf. “How was your day out?”

“It was good. Yours?” Harry asked, going over to Paul.

“Eh. Boring. Lots of paperwork.” Harry smirked.

“Sorry to hear that.” He knew that that paperwork was about him, but he didn’t mind. He didn’t seem to mind Paul writing about him much now. Only if he shared it with anyone else did he mind.

“You ready to eat some pizza?” Harry nodded and started off down the hallway. He stopped and looked at Paul.

“Coming?” Paul rolled his eyes and came up beside Harry.

“Smart aleck.” He said. Harry shrugged. Paul led the way to the recreation room and allowed Harry to enter first. Sparky was still wearing the crown. He was tackled from behind. Harry threw up his hands and hoped that his magic didn’t obliterate the person. He wanted to ask a few questions.

“Hi, Evan!” Oh, it was Bug. Back, magic, back! Harry lowered his arms and mock-glared.

“Are you always this enthusiastic?” Harry asked.

“Only when we get birthday cake. Come on, let’s eat.” Harry rolled his eyes and got up.

“Pizza’s here.” Harry worked his way through two and a half slices, Sparky had one and a half, while the rest of the hall acted as though they would never see pizza again in their natural lives.

Harry jumped as the lights went out. He pulled up his pants leg and was ready to draw his wand when he heard singing. Oh, the birthday song. It was all that talk about Dumbledore. It made him paranoid. “And many more!” They finished. Harry fought away a blush and thanked them as Jack slid a huge cake in front of Harry with sixteen candles in the icing. He saw the inscription and snorted. It read “007” in frosting.

“Make a wish and blow them out.” Jack instructed. Harry closed his eyes and thought about his wish.

I wish that none of my friends die in this war. That we beat Voldemort. Well, while I’m wishing, I would like my parents and god-“ Harry took a deep breath and blew out his candles. The room erupted into applause. Jack picked up a cake cutter and handed it to Harry.

“Here you go, birthday boy.” Harry cut the cake and helped serve it out while Jack dished out ice cream. After everyone had at least two pieces (including Sparky), Paul set up the VCR.

“You guys ready for the first part?” The entire floor crowded onto two couches and appeared ready for the movie. “Now, Evan hasn’t seen this yet, so no vital plot giveaways.” Paul hit the play button and darted out of the way. Harry jumped as the music started. He didn’t move at all throughout the movie. The end credits rolled and he blinked. That had been awesome!

“You still there, Evan?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, I’m here. Kind of want to join the rebellion and train as a Jedi, but I’m here.” He told Paul. The entire group laughed.

“I felt the same way.” Paul told him. “I got to see it in the theaters.” Harry smiled when Bug and Chef dropped to their knees.

“We’re not worthy! We are worms!” The two chanted. The rest of the floor threw pillows at them.

“You two are so weird.” Sparky said in the most serious voice he could muster. They shrugged and returned the pillows. Paul stepped in before a pillow fight could erupt.

“All right guys. Bedtime.” Everyone, including Harry, groaned. “Go on, little Jedi. Lights out in half an hour.” Harry thanked everyone again and went to his room. He had just enough time to write Hermione and tell her about his first Star Wars experience. He wondered if he could use wandless magic to pose as a Jedi. The mind trick was a little too much like Imperius, but the rest could be fun.

Dear Hermione,

Star Wars is the best movie ever! I can identify with Luck. He was an orphan, sent to live with an aunt and uncle, mentored by an old “wizard” who introduces him to new parts of himself, got involved in a war he doesn’t fully understand but does it because it’s right, instant hero, people saving thing. He’s like my twin brother from a galaxy far, far away. I can’t wait until I see the next two. Oh yeah. Darth Vader. Scary guy. That breathing freaked me out. I think I would like to be a Jedi, if they existed, that is. It’s an overwhelming idea. You’ve let a genie out of a bottle. I need to see the rest of them.

Write me back,

Harry

Harry collapsed into bed, thoughts firmly centered on the movie he had seen. He fell asleep listening to the theme song in his head. He

had fallen asleep before Paul came to give him sleeping pills. He dreamed of Jedi.

“Ah, Harry. Welcome back.”

Author's Note Part 2: I know. I know. I'm evil. And Petunia was out of character. But she needed to be. If you feel the need to make a suggestion, just review. Love you all!

Author's Note: Hey all! Here's the next chapter. I hope you all like it. I will warn you. It's intense. Stay away if you don't like heavy emotions.

"Ah, Harry. Welcome back." Harry rolled over and sat up, glaring at Voldemort. How dare he interrupt Harry's first fun dream? "Well, someone's cranky." Voldemort said, waving his wand to change the room.

"Nice word, Tom. Hanging around with Muggles?" Harry stood and folded his arms. "What would your Death Eaters say?" Harry decided he liked standing in the exact spot that he was in. Let Voldemort try to move him. It wouldn't happen.

"You are looking better." Harry smirked. Voldemort was obviously perplexed over Harry's current state of health. A few nights of decent sleep had done wonders for Harry and Voldemort couldn't figure it out.

"Wish I could say the same for you." Harry shrugged. "So, is there a reason you interrupted my dream this time. My answer to your offers is still 'no'." Harry shook his head when Voldemort gestured to a seat. "I'll stand, thanks."

"That dream of yours was utter nonsense." Voldemort told him, conjuring a cup of tea and sipping it. "Swords of light and flying outer space ships. Nonsense." Voldemort offered a cup of tea to Harry.

"No thanks." Harry sighed. "So, you interrupted my dream because you didn't understand it?" Harry rubbed his face and chewed his bottom lip. "That's not fair." Harry felt himself beginning to tire but he wasn't going to let Voldemort know that. "If that's all you wanted, could you leave my head? I want to go back to sleep and see if I can go back to my dream." Voldemort put down his tea cup and looked at Harry.

"Did you even think about my offer?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes. My answer is still 'no'." Harry glared at Voldemort. It was becoming important to sit down, but Harry ignored his legs. Somebody wake me up!

“You feel that Dumbledore will give you the education and training you need?” Well, Harry wanted to say yes, he really did. He couldn’t say it though, not after what Hermione had told him earlier. “You don’t, do you?” Voldemort accused. Harry shrugged.

“Do you trust him?” Harry returned. He wanted to keep Voldemort talking and away from his wand.

“Of course not! Manipulative old codger.” Voldemort mumbled a few words under his breath about stupid boys and their pointless questions. “What has he done to you, I wonder?” Harry decided to take his favorite topic dodging method. He shrugged. Voldemort stood and eyed him. Wow, it worked. “What are you planning to do now that you are no longer so firmly under Dumbledore’s thumb?” Voldemort asked, coming to stand in front of Harry.

“I don’t know. Join the Rebellion.” Voldemort blinked.

“The Rebellion?” Harry smirked.

“It’s a Muggle saying.” Harry told him. Voldemort’s face twisted as though he had seen Lucius Malfoy in a tutu.

“I could help you with your Dumbledore problem. Give you some independence.” Voldemort offered.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend?” Harry asked. “Not quite ready to agree to anything yet.” Harry shrugged. “Besides, I know where to find you if I want you.” Harry had a feeling that this tentative peace in his head was going to end very shortly. He wanted to be awake before the event descended into Voldemort becoming a power hungry mad wizard. Oh, wait. Too late.

“The offer stands.” Voldemort told him. “As well as my previous offer of training and a place at my side.” Harry shook his head.

“No thanks. Will you get out of my head now?” Voldemort’s eyes grew cold. Oh, good. I have something familiar now. “No need to demonstrate your power. I know you can do magic.” Harry told him as he went for his wand.

“You foolish boy. You should take what I offer.” Voldemort’s wand appeared in his hand again and Harry took a deep breath.

“Foolish? That’s your opinion.” Harry told him. “Leave.”

“I will leave when I wish to leave.” Harry rolled his eyes and closed them. He gasped as he felt Voldemort grab his arms. His scar split open. “I could make you so much more than you are. Why can’t you understand that?” Voldemort demanded. Harry reached up a hand to his forehead and ground his teeth.

“I don’t need you.” He bit out. “Let go of me.” Voldemort released him and stalked away. Harry rubbed his scar and winced as he felt the tender skin pull.

“Imperio.” Harry felt a fog settle over his mind. “Join me.” Now, why in the world would he want to do that? “Join me.” No. “Join me.” Well, something- NO. “Join me.”

“No.” Harry told him, meeting his eyes. Voldemort scowled and stared at Harry.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, you foolish child.” Harry shook his head.

“I know.” Harry took a step toward Voldemort. “I want it this way.” Voldemort lost his patience and raised his wand.

“Crucio!” Harry fell as the spell hit him. Someone wake me. Harry pleaded in his mind, hoping that someone would know to wake him. Voldemort released the spell and Harry gasped in air, trying to figure out how long the spell had lasted.

“It doesn’t have to be this way. Once you say yes, it will all stop.” Oh, from the end of the spell and Harry’s position on the floor, that sounded like a good idea. No, he needed to move. Harry tried to roll over to push himself up to his feet, but Voldemort stopped him. “You’ll only hurt yourself if you keep moving.” Voldemort restrained him and looked into Harry’s eyes. Harry quickly blanked his mind the best he could.

“Let go of me!” His voice broke a little. Oh, there was real intimidation.

“You have forgotten your own limits, Harry.” Voldemort conjured the bed again and levitated Harry over to it. “I want to help you.” Harry tried to scoot away from Voldemort but he didn’t get far.

“I don’t need your help. You’ve already helped my life enough.” Harry crawled off the bed and stood. “If you really want to help me, leave me alone.” Voldemort frowned.

“I offered to bring your parents back.” He told Harry, collapsing into a chair. “I don’t know what else you want.” Voldemort sat in silence, regarding Harry. “You are a stubborn child.”

“I know what you want. You want me against Dumbledore.” Harry said. He blinked. The room was rolling. That was an interesting sight. “I want you out of my head.” Voldemort eyed him, taking in Harry’s shaking.

“Sit down before you fall down. You don’t look well.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Are you serious?” He was shocked when Voldemort actually got up and physically pushed him back on the bed. Well, he had been serious. “I don’t understand you.” Voldemort turned away from Harry and sighed.

“That makes two of us.” Voldemort turned back to Harry. “I have offered you everything, and still you resist. Why?” Harry stared back at him.

“I don’t want what you offer.” Voldemort looked to be visibly restraining himself from hitting Harry. Oh, I think I pushed him too far. Harry fell off the bed when Voldemort started the Cruciatus Curse again. He grunted as his head hit the floor. Oh, pretty lights. Harry felt arms take hold of him and lift him up, but it wasn’t Voldemort. No, the maniac wizard still had him under Crucio, but Harry was waking up.

“Harry!” Now who was that? “Wake up, Harry!” Paul. It was Paul. Thank goodness for Paul being there. Harry heard Voldemort cursing as he opened his eyes and his hands flew to his scar. Blood. He had blood in his eyes. “You’re okay, Harry. You’re safe now.” Harry wanted to tell Paul what had happened, how they had almost had a civil conversation before Voldemort went crazy and cursed him, but somehow his mouth wouldn’t work. “We’ll get you cleaned up, buddy.” Paul lifted him and managed to get Harry back into his bed. “Thanks for the water, Jack. Harry, can you look at me?” Harry opened his eyes again, wondering when he had closed them again, and looked at Paul. Paul was worried. “Can you swallow something for me?” Harry nodded and winced. Oh, he felt like he had really hit his head. Paul lifted the glass of water up to Harry’s lips and allowed him a sip.

“I hurt my head.” Harry whispered. “It hurts in the back.” Paul nodded and gave Harry a quick examination. He used a small light that made Harry’s head pound worse than it would have had Fluffy danced on it. He groaned and pushed the light away.

“No concussion. You gave yourself a pretty good knock, that’s all.” Paul motioned for Jack to help Harry sit up. “Sleeping pills, Harry. We’ll talk about your dreams when you wake up.” Harry swallowed the pills and motioned for Paul to stay.

“He still wants me to join him.” He told Paul once Jack had left. “He cursed me. A lot. I don’t think that I’ll be able to move tomorrow.” Harry yawned. “I think that I’m going to sleep now.” Paul smiled and patted Harry’s hand.

“Go ahead, buddy. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Harry didn’t answer. Paul shook his head and stood up. If Paul ever met this Voldemort character in a dark alley somewhere, only one person was going to be alive afterwards, and it wouldn’t be the one with the wand.

True to his word, Harry could not move much the next day. Or the day after. Or the day after. Paul had given him painkillers that helped so he could walk, but he didn’t want to do much more than that. Paul wanted Harry to skip his martial arts class, but Harry said that just watching could teach him something. Paul sent a note along to Sensei anyway, telling Sensei that Harry was not allowed any physical activity at all that day. Harry had been waved to a bench and he had sat through the whole class, completely happy just to watch.

It had been a week since the Voldemort incident and Harry smiled as he watched the end of another class. He would get to participate tomorrow. He didn’t need painkillers this morning and didn’t feel the slightest bit stiff. He was glad that Paul had listened to his protests that nothing could be done for that particular curse and only time would heal his aches. Harry had dreaded trying to explain to a Muggle doctor why he had severe nerve damage when he had just been sleeping. No, that would have gone over like a lead balloon.

Today had been interesting. Harry had enjoyed all of his classes and Sky had said that he was coming along nicely and should be up to form level in just a few short months. He didn’t know why, but that pleased him. Martial arts had just ended and he returned his wandering attention to reality. He was gathering his school bag when Sensei stopped him.

“Rick!” Rick’s head snapped up. “Suit up.” Rick nodded to Harry and moved to some shelves in the back. “Evan, stay where you are. I want you to see this.” Harry nodded and sank back onto the bench, unconsciously pulling his legs up to his chest. He watched as Sensei pulled on boxing gloves and put something in his mouth. Rick came to the center with the same equipment. They tapped gloves and starting fighting each other. Harry had never seen anything like it before. If they hadn’t looked like they were trying to hurt each other, he would have said that they were dancing. Ten minutes passed

before Sensei called a halt. Sensei stepped back and bowed with Rick. "Cool down." Rick nodded and went to put his equipment away. "What do you think, Evan?" Harry just smiled.

"Wow." Sensei nodded.

"Wow indeed." Sensei's head cocked to the side and looked at Harry. "Un-ball yourself." Harry had no idea what Sensei meant. Sensei reached out and took hold of Harry's feet before lowering them to the ground. "No more ball." Sensei mussed Harry's hair and gave a small smile. "Rick will walk you to your classroom." Harry nodded and Rick threw an arm around Harry's shoulder guiding him from the room. Sensei stared after him before he appeared to come to a decision, nod to himself, and turn towards the locker room. He had time for a shower before the next class came in half an hour.

"Is he always like that?" Harry asked Rick as the pair of them went down the hallway.

"Eh. He gets really quiet when he's angry." Rick confided with a smile as they walked down the hallway. "You haven't seen him angry yet." Harry shook his head in bewilderment.

"Are you a student here?" Harry asked. Rick shook his head.

"No, I come with Dad." Harry was about to ask who that was when he figured it out. He turned sharply and stared at Rick.

"Sensei is your father?" he blurted out. How in the world had Rick managed to survive this long?

"He's my dad. My biological father left me and my mom when I was one or two. Sensei married my mother when I was four. He's my dad, and I couldn't have picked a better one." Rick told him with a smile. "What about you? What are your parents like?" Harry shrugged.

"I don't really know. They died when I was a baby." Rick nodded. He decided then and there that he liked Rick for his lack of sympathy. Harry really liked that. "I live with my aunt and uncle. We're not really

close, but my aunt sent me here.” Rick nodded again. Oh, he really liked Rick.

“Must have been weird, growing up with just them. I can’t imagine life without my sisters, though sometimes I wish I could.” Harry laughed a bit and smiled.

“I had my cousin Dudley, who is just really weird right now. We were raised together, but didn’t get along.” Rick smiled, telling Harry he knew something about not getting along with another child. “Sirius told me a bunch of pranks to try on him, but I never got around to them.” He hefted his bag onto his shoulder and smiled.

“Who’s Sirius?”

“My godfather.” He stopped walking as their subject caught up with his mind. No, I don’t want to remember. No, please. My fault. The Department of Mysteries. Sirius’s face as Bellatrix Lestrange first toyed with him and then cursed him. Sirius’s look of horror as he fell through the veil. Remus holding him back. Him going after Bellatrix. Voldemort and Dumbledore. The possession. Him destroying Dumbledore’s office. The prophecy.

“I know it hurts. Let it out. It’s okay.” A soft voice chanted in his ear. “Just let it go. Let it out.” Harry followed the instructions, too tired and upset to think for himself at the moment. He cried until he had no tears left. He tried to pull away, but didn’t get far. He was too tired. What had happened? Where was he? Who was the voice? “Tissue.” Harry took it and realized that he was in Paul’s office and Paul was sitting next to him, offering him a tissue. Harry took it and tried to clean his face off. Paul shook his head and stilled Harry’s hands and Paul did it for him. Harry rested against the back of the sofa, trying to push the memories away again. It didn’t work. They were still there. “So, what happened to set you off?” Paul asked quietly, setting the box of tissues aside. Harry took a breath to answer but cut it off when he felt that he was going to cry again. “You can tell me, Harry.”

“Sorry.” Paul looked at Harry in genuine surprise.

“I have no idea why you are apologizing.” Paul told him, offering another tissue for Harry’s ruined one. Harry took one and toyed with it. “What happened?” Paul asked. Harry shrugged. Paul was not going to let him get away with that this time. “Rick mentioned that you were talking about someone called Sirius.” Ah ha. That was what had triggered Harry. Harry pushed his body to his feet and started for the door. Paul reached out and stopped Harry with a hand.

“Stop running from this.” Paul told him in a calm voice. “You have emotions. They are apart of you, Harry, and you have the same rights as everyone else to express them.” Harry shook his head. He hadn’t turned back to face Paul, but at least he had stayed. “Oh, and why not?” Paul asked.

“I’m not like everyone else. I can’t do it. I’m not supposed to. I need to stay strong.” Paul pulled Harry back to the couch. Harry did not resist and sank back into the cushions with a sigh.

“Yes, you can. I don’t know who told you that you can’t grieve over someone, but you obviously need to do so. Why don’t you?” Harry took a deep breath and shook his head, shutting his eyes against Paul’s worried face. No, he was happy in denial, thanks so much.

Paul watched as Harry seemed to fight something inside of him. Why was Harry so determined to keep things inside of him? Paul stared at Harry until Harry looked at him. “its okay, Harry. You can do it.” Harry shook his head again and fought to keep his breathing calm. “I’m here for you, Harry.” Paul wasn’t sure what happened, what he had said that connected with Harry, but the boy broke.

“No, you’re not. It’s my fault.” Harry buried his face in his hands. Paul reached out a hand and put it on Harry’s shoulder. Harry leaned into him. “I shouldn’t have gone.” Harry mumbled through his tears. “He would still be alive if I hadn’t.” Ah, so someone did die. Paul had been right.

Harry took some deep breaths to calm himself, but they only caught in his throat. Wonderful. Why had he listened to Voldemort? Why had he gone? Why hadn’t he trusted Snape? Why had he been so stupid?

“Who’s Sirius, Harry?” Paul asked. Harry thought about his friend. Paul. His friend! Harry took a slight breath and spoke.

“My godfather.” Harry whispered. Paul wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulder and pulled him closer. “He died.” Paul nodded and Harry knew that Paul was just willing to listen, that he didn’t want to make Harry feel better or tell him that it wasn’t his fault. He would just listen.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Harry paused. Yes, more than anything, for some reason. He nodded, but still hesitated. He didn’t want Paul to think any less of him for what he had done. But, Paul had said that he wouldn’t judge him, right? That they were friends?

“Voldemort sent me a vision. He had Sirius and was torturing him. I had to go. No one else knew. I tried checking the house first. Kreacher, the house elf, lied to me and said that Sirius was gone.” Harry paused to wipe his face. “There was an Order member at school. I could have told him. He hated Sirius. I didn’t trust him. I didn’t think he would help.” Harry stopped, trying to get a handle on his breathing. He didn’t want to start crying again. Why did this hurt so much and feel so good at the same time?

“Then what happened?” Paul asked. Oh yeah. He was talking to Paul.

“My friends from the Defense Association came with me. They didn’t want me to go alone.” Harry shook his head. “They were in such danger. There was no real way to prepare them for what they were getting into. No way to warn them. They were all hurt. Death Eaters were waiting for us. I nearly got my friends killed. Two lives on my hands were enough. I didn’t want my friends added to them.” Paul froze but allowed Harry to continue. What, exactly, had happened to him? Why in the world did Harry feel that he had killed someone? If either Dumbledore or Voldemort were responsible, there was going to be one less wizard in the world, if Paul could find them, of course.

“Sirius came to save me. He dueled his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, and she threw him through a doorway that leads to the afterlife. He died. It was my fault.” Harry sat in silence after his last admission, obviously trying to pull himself together and not succeeding very well at all. Paul stayed close, thinking over what Harry had said. Harry had been through a lot, and everything he had said made Paul want to shake some sense into that headmaster. He no one seen what was happening with this boy?

“It’s not your fault.” Harry froze and held his breath. He wasn’t wrong! How dare Paul tell him he was wrong? He was right! Harry opened his mouth to contradict Paul. “Wait a minute. Breathe. Stop and think.” Harry took a few deep breaths as he followed Paul’s instructions. “May I tell you my impression of the wizarding world?” He asked. Harry nodded, wondering where this would lead.

“Imagine an eleven year old child pushed into an alternate dimension where nothing follows the rules he knew and then that same child is told that he needs to do certain things without fail.” Paul started. Harry tried to make a connection. “For instance, in this alternate dimension, everyone walks on their hands, because it is impolite to walk on their feet, but this child doesn’t know this and must teach himself to fit in. That doesn’t mean he understands it.” Paul stood and moved to the chair across from Harry. “He never is really successful at it, but he manages to fool everyone into thinking that he is quite capable of walking on his hands.” Paul leaned forward and looked at Harry. “Does that seem fair to you?”

No, that didn’t seem fair at all. Someone could have taken the time to explain it to him. “No.” He told Paul. Paul smiled at Harry.

“Now, imagine an eleven year old who has lived with Muggles, that’s the right word, isn’t it?” Harry nodded. “Alright, an eleven year old who has lived with Muggles all his life and then is suddenly told that he is a wizard.” Harry could begin to see the connection that Paul was trying to draw. “That he can do magic.” Harry wanted to interrupt, but Paul had already started again. “Sure, they’ll teach him, but he’s special and won’t need the same help everyone else needs. After all, his parents were wizards. Oh, yes. Let’s not forget that he’s left-

handed. Well, that little trait,” Paul stopped and looked at Harry sharply, as though trying to convey some sort of message “should be enough to make up for everything he doesn’t understand.” Harry understood what Paul was trying to say. His hand rose to his forehead and he fingered it. That was his left hand. He had been on his own from mostly day one in the magical world! Paul saw Harry make the connection and smiled. “Do you understand what I’m trying to say?” Harry nodded.

“It’s not fair.” Harry told him. Paul sat back in his chair.

“No, it’s not. I just don’t think that you realized what exact situation this oh-so-superior society of magic forced you into. Add to that fame and prestige, and it’s an accident waiting to happen.” Harry stared at Paul. How had Paul gotten to be so smart?

“Wow.” Paul smiled. Harry must like that word. He used it a lot, mostly when he didn’t know what to say. “I- wow.” Paul studied Harry. Was he ready to continue?

“About your godfather.” Harry looked up. “Did you always make his decisions for him?” Oh, the kid was mad! No Jedi calm there. Pure fury.

“Of course not! He was a grown man!” Harry snapped. Paul smiled. Perfect.

“Yes, he was a grown man.” He told Harry. “So, are you saying that he could make his own decisions?” Harry folded his arms and glared.

“He could make his own decisions.” Harry told him. Paul could tell that Harry was restraining himself from saying something impolite.

“Alright. He could make his own decisions. Why are you blaming yourself for one of his decisions?” Harry sat up to the edge of the couch.

“If I wouldn’t have been so stupid, he wouldn’t have made the decision he did.” Harry told him.

“You admit that it was his decision?” Harry threw his arms into the air.

“Yes!” He sat back, clearly exasperated. “I don’t want to talk about Sirius anymore.” He told Paul, wanting to stop. He didn’t want to keep hurting.

“Just answer me one question?” Harry nodded. One question couldn’t hurt. “If Sirius had decided to leave the house, stepped into the street, and was run over by a bus, would it have been your fault?” Harry stared at Paul.

“Run over by a bus?” He parroted. “By a bus?”

“Banana peel, staircase, struck by lightening. What have you. Would those methods of death been your fault as a result of his decision to leave the house?” Harry shook his head.

“No. Accidents, mostly. But a bus?” Paul smiled. He had picked the right topic. “A bus?” Harry sounded a bit disgusted with Paul’s choice.

“He decided to leave the house, where he was safe, correct?” Harry nodded. “So, he decided to leave the house, and he decided that he would tackle some very dangerous wizards, and he decided that he could do it.” He looked at Harry. “You are following me?” He asked Harry.

“His decision.” Harry said quietly. “It was his decision.” Paul reached over and put a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“His decision.” He agreed. Harry looked up at him and Paul saw something different in Harry’s eyes. Some of what had darkened them had fled. It lurked in the corners, but it was almost gone. “It’s not your fault.” Harry took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“I know.” Paul watched as Harry sank into the couch. “I know.”

Author's Note: Whew! Ten pages. I'm tired and it's almost one in the morning. Please review if you have any helpful suggestions. I am rather attached to this chapter, so make helpful suggestions.

Author's Note: And here's the next chapter. Enjoy!

Paul looked up from his notes when h someone knocked on his door. He had at least fifteen minutes before Harry would be out of class. "Come in." The door opened to reveal Sensei Leonard.

"What can I do for you, Leonard?" Paul motioned him to a seat.

"I want Evan James with me for a few hours every Saturday." Paul looked at Leonard in surprise.

"For what?" Sensei folded his arms and looked at the floor.

"You are aware that his life is in danger." It was not a question. Had Harry told him?

"He told you?" Sensei shook his head and turned to the window.

"He looks it." Sensei said quietly. "It lurks in his eyes, shows through his movements, and almost radiates off him as he thinks." Sensei shook his head as though to ward off the same feelings. "Someone has threatened him, Paul, and he does not expect to survive that threat." Sensei turned around to face Paul again. "I want him with me for a few hours every Saturday." He went to the door. "Arrange it." Sensei left the office and Paul stared after him for a few seconds before turning back to his desk. He pulled out Harry's schedule and wrote in three hours for Sensei on Saturdays. That would free up some hours in case the lessons took longer than Sensei expected. He only hoped that Sensei would give Harry some skills that would help him against fully trained wizards.

Harry walked out of the door of the classroom, trying to force his science notebook into his schoolbag. Science was one of his weak points, along with math and history, that Skye tutored him I everyday. Every other subject was only two days a week. He looked up to see a huge crowd of students around a bulletin board.

"Hi, Evan. Done with classes today?" Harry nodded.

“Yeah. What’s going on here?” Harry gestured towards the crowd.

“Oh, they posted the sign-up sheet for this fall’s play. You missed the last play by a week. They do one every term.” Bug explained. A play? “It’s really popular, because there are so many things you can do. I already signed up for set design and construction. You should sign up too. You’re good at art.”

Harry shrugged and settled his school bag over his shoulder. “I’ll think about it.” He said good-bye to Bug and started for Paul’s office. He had an appointment.

“Hey, buddy. Come on in.” Harry went into Paul’s office, the most comfortable room in the school in his opinion, and crashed onto the couch. He settled against the pillows and closed his eyes. He loved this couch. “How are you today?” Harry gave a small smile and sighed.

“I love this couch.” Paul laughed and moved his chair closer to Harry. “I feel good today.” Paul nodded. “No dreams from Voldemort. No aches. No visions.” He reached into his schoolbag and pulled out his science book. “Know anything about plate tectonics? Sky told me all about it today and it’s got me wondering about something.” Harry flipped open his book to the appropriate page.

“Such as?” Paul asked.

“How in the world does the wizarding community explain natural disasters?” Paul made a note in his notebook and shook his head.

“I don’t know. You do not cover things like that in school?”

“Not really. This is interesting and I don’t understand why wizards wouldn’t want to know about this.” Paul sat back in his chair and shook his head.

“I don’t understand a lot when it comes to the wizarding world, Harry.” Paul told him. “It doesn’t seem logical.”

“You can’t explain making something fly or disappear logically.” Harry shrugged and put his book away. “Bug told me about the school play coming up.” Harry picked up one of the throw pillows and toyed with it. “He thinks I should sign up.” Harry looked up at Paul.

“Is it something you want to do?” He asked. Harry shrugged and put the pillow back in its place.

“I’ve never done it before.” He told Paul. “I don’t get much of a chance to do play-acting. Harry stopped and paused at Paul’s face. “What?” Paul smiled.

“I think you’d be better at it than you realize.” Harry looked up. “Think about it. How many times have you found in necessary to act like someone else? To project artificial feelings?” Harry messed with the pillow again.

“Too many times.” Harry answered, hugging the pillow.

“So put those skills to good use. Have some fun with them.” Paul counseled.

“I’ll think about it.” Harry promised.

“How’s your meditation coming?” Harry sighed. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m distracted by bright shiny objects.” Harry told him. Paul blinked and tried to work out exactly what that was supposed to mean. “Bug told me that. I’m easily distracted. I can’t focus on my breathing for a long time. I get bored, or lose focus or something like that.” Harry shrugged.

“Bright shiny objects? Okay. Well, let’s try something else. Get comfortable.” Paul stood and dimmed the lights. He sat back down near Harry and took Harry’s hand. Harry tensed. “Relax and close your eyes. There’s nothing here to hurt you.” Harry nodded and took a deep breath. “Focus on your breathing for now.”

“Why are you holding my hand?” Harry asked.

“Breathing.” Harry frowned and did as he was told. He could trust Paul. Deep breath in, deep breath out. In, out. Harry wasn’t sure how long he managed to focus on his breathing, but he soon started thinking about something else. He jumped as Paul started moving his thumb. “Focus on this, Harry. Just this movement.” Harry took a deep breath and nodded. That was...soothing. Really relaxing. “Focus on this.” Harry did as he was told and found that a lot of his thoughts were quieting down. He smiled to himself and sighed. That was really relaxing. He blinked as Paul moved away. “Easier?” Paul asked.

“Yeah, thanks.” Paul reached over to his desk.

“No problem. That’s what I’m here for.” Paul pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Harry. “Sensei has requested that you spend more time with him on Saturdays. Is that alright with you?” Harry tossed the pillow into the air.

“Sure. Sensei’s brilliant.” Paul handed Harry his new schedule. “Three hours?” Paul nodded and shrugged.

“I don’t think that he’ll take that long. I just thought it prudent to schedule that much, just in case.” Paul looked at Harry. “Are you okay with that?”

“I can always stop if I don’t like it?” he asked.

“Of course you can.” Paul told him. “I will never force you to do anything you really don’t want to do that isn’t necessary. Remember that.” Harry nodded and pulled his legs up.

“Um, Paul?” Paul looked at him. “Could we go outside for a while?” Harry asked. This was new. Harry didn’t like being outside.

“Are you really Harry?” Paul demanded. “Voldemort didn’t possess?” Harry threw a pillow into the air and shook his head.

“Alright, I’ll take you outside, but only if you tell me what movie we watched.” Harry rolled his eyes and smiled.

“Star Wars. Thanks for asking, though.” Harry stood and beat Paul to the door. “Coming, Paul?” Harry asked.

“Yes, I’m coming.” Paul muttered, getting to his feet. Once outside, Harry sat down under a tree and leaned back against it. He closed his eyes and let out a contented sigh as Paul settled next to him. “So, is there a reason that you wanted to come out here?” Harry nodded and stayed quiet. Paul didn’t push him. Harry would talk in a minute.

“Dumbledore made me think that if I set foot outside my aunt’s house, Voldemort would swoop down and kill me.” Harry took a deep breath and ran his hand over the grass at his feet. “Dumbledore made me a prisoner in that house.” Paul watched as Harry traced patterns in the grass, back and forth, as though practicing waving his wand. “I have been here for a few weeks and Voldemort has yet to find me, much less attack me. It’s nice.” Harry smiled to himself, forgetting Paul’s presence as he played with the grass.

Paul watched as Harry played with the grass. How can a grown man make a child afraid of being outdoors? Why would he, more importantly? He looks so old most of the time. Tired. Afraid. I like this look on him more. Paul smiled as Harry’s face lost some of the cynical tint and gained a more childlike air. Why couldn’t Harry look like this all the time? He was snapped out of his musings when Harry spoke. “Paul?”

“Yes, Harry?” Harry opened his eyes and looked at Paul.

“You said I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do, right?” Paul nodded.

“That’s right.” Harry smiled.

“So, if Dumbledore were to show up, and I didn’t want to go with him, you wouldn’t make me go, would you?” Paul shook his head.

“No. I wouldn’t make you go.” Paul promised. “Are you thinking about it?” he asked softly, afraid that Harry would stop talking.

“A little. No decision yet.” Harry said, a little hesitant as to what Paul might say. “I don’t really know what I want yet.” Paul nodded. “Remember how I said that I hated it here?” Harry paused. “I don’t hate it here. Not really.”

“I understand.” They sat for another ten minutes before Paul nudged Harry. “You have martial arts class.” Harry took off for the building, muttering about getting a watch with an alarm on it. Paul smiled after him. What a typically teenager thing to say.
One week later.....

Dear Hermione,

I have a break so I’d thought that I’d write to you. This summer studies thing is the best. I’m learning an awful lot, almost too much. We’re all tired. The professors and other instructors are pretty hard on us. We have five to six hours of studying a night and we’re up before dawn everyday. We’re learning a lot of defensive spells and teamwork. Every one of us has at least one other wizard in their family. The headmaster told us that we are going to be the protectors of the school. That and we get to protect Harry. The headmaster told us that he sometimes needs protection from himself, and thinking back, I kind of have to agree.

Dumbledore mentioned that Harry is still at home with the Dursleys and that Voldemort has tried to attack the house a few times. Harry doesn’t want to leave them alone without a wizard in the house. Typical Harry. He’s always saving someone, isn’t he? That means he won’t be able to join us here just yet, but he will join us sooner or later. The Protectors all share one dormitory now, and Harry will be moved out of Gryffindor and in with us this coming year.

The oddest person here is Draco Malfoy. He told us that he watched a Death Eater meeting and decided that he couldn’t join them. After

all, “Malfoys grovel to no one”. He’s okay, so long as he doesn’t insult you, which he has promised to stop doing.

I wish I could make this longer, but I’m due for a training session soon. Please tell Harry that I’ll see him when he comes to Hogwarts.

Sincerely,

Ron

Hermione sighed and put down Ron’s letter. It was exactly as she feared. A bunch of her classmates were being trained to protect Harry. It was not fair to anyone involved, Harry most of all. How dare Dumbledore decide that Harry did not need training? That Harry would want to leave Gryffindor and move into another dorm? She had to tell Harry, but he wouldn’t be too happy. She rolled off her bed and went back to her desk.

Dear Harry, (Skywalker)

How are you? I do hope that you’re fine. I’m sure that you’re having a great time. I promised you that I would pass on information about Ron, so here it is. All of the people chosen each had at least one other wizard in their family. Dumbledore is calling the group “Protectors”. They are to protect Hogwarts and you. Dumbledore said that Voldemort has tried to attack the Dursley’s house a few times this summer, which I know for a fact is not true. Also, he plans to move you out of Gryffindor and into the Protectors’ dormitory.

As for Draco Malfoy, I guess he got to see what Death Eaters really do. He told Ron that “Malfoys grovel to no one”. Strange, isn’t it?

I’ll be by for a visit soon. Until then, may the Force be with you.

Love,

Hermione

Harry refolded Hermione’s letter and put it back in his bag. Dumbledore was trying to order his life again and he didn’t like it. He should be getting trained. He should be at Hogwarts.

Harry felt the need to be outside. He needed to be outside. He picked up his bag and went downstairs. He paused to sign out at the desk and told the attendant that he would be back in an hour. He wandered around the grounds, thinking to himself about everything he had learned about himself in the last few weeks. It was a matter of mental health and control over his life. He didn't want to give either of them up. He needed them to survive this war and without them, Voldemort would have no trouble coercing Harry to his side. He knew how close he had come to accepting Voldemort's offer of a place by his side just to make it all stop. It had been too close for his comfort. He couldn't go back to Hogwarts now. He wasn't ready. He hadn't mastered Occlumency. He couldn't do it. Not yet.

Author's Note: To all of the wonderful people who take time out to review: THANK YOU SO MUCH! You guys keep me going and spur me on to massive amounts of frantic scribbling known as the creative process. Thank you again.

Author's Note: Why am I updating in the middle of finals week? I must be insane. I don't know what I am thinking. Oh well. I hope you all like. I do answer one review here, so if you are not the reviewer "Great", please skip it. If you'd like a response to your reviews, please give me an email address. Thanks!

To Great, the anonymous reviewer: You must have had a really bad day when you wrote your review. I don't know if you were ever in therapy, but it is an extremely slow process. I think I pulled that off well. To address some of your concerns: Therapy is slow. Patience is best in dealing with Harry. His family is also in therapy, hence Dudley's action (I will include more on this later). I feel that there is more to Petunia than JKR has let on (we get a glimpse of this in Book 5), and I am taking that concept and adapting it to my story. As for the Muggle doctor finding out, it was not in three hours. Harry had been there for well over a week and was extremely distraught at the time. I'm sorry if that wasn't exactly clear. I'll change it if it isn't. As for the hospital...I am insulted. The hospital is exactly like the one I was at for eight weeks when I was a kid for my anorexia and I remember every detail very well. Sylvia used me as a source when she first started writing this story. Paul does not make a promise he can't keep. As for the sleeping pills, they are carefully monitored by a trained medical professional. Give Paul a little credit in his abilities. He knows what he is doing. I know exactly what I am doing with the dreams. I'm sorry that you feel I don't. The tracking spell finding Harry...look at the title of the story and think about what Dumbledore has said about blood magic. I can't give you more than that. "Harry's new defence, martial arts, is worthless (sic)"...I take it you've never studied them as that is your attitude. Martial arts are not just about fighting. Talk to any good martial artist (good, mind you!) and they will say that they train not to fight. Harry is learning skills that will help him avoid conflict i.e. – stopping to think before fighting, confidence, discipline, and ability to rely on others. This training does not mean that Harry will turn into some super fighter, but he will be trained to know when to fight, know when to run, and know when to call on help. "if you cant decide what to do to move along the plot then dont keep updating with chapter after chapter of filler crap. (sic)" Can you build a house without a foundation? No. This is what the previous chapters are, my foundation. I suggest you have a bit more patience. If you are still reading this story, you will find that the next few chapters will pick up

the pace. In the future, please sign in so that I may address your concerns. If you cannot sign in, please leave an email address so that I can answer you. Thanks for reading and reviewing. Your concerns will be noted, for if there is one person, there is sure to be others who feel the same way.

Now on to the story!

Dear Mi,

Thank you for passing along the information. I have something to ask you. Would you mind if I didn't come back to Hogwarts this year? I've been thinking about it and I just don't think that I am ready to do it. Not with everything Dumbledore has done. I wouldn't blame you if you did get angry with me, but I need to do what is best for me. I'm just starting to realize that. Paul has said that I can stay here if I want to, and I am tempted to take him up on the offer. Before I make a final decision, I was wondering if you'd be willing to look into something for me? I need to know if Hogwarts has anything like homeschooling or a correspondence course available. Thank you in advance for all of your help. I don't know what I would do without you.

Oh, there is a school play coming up. Paul thinks I should try out. What do you think? Please write back.

Love,

Skywalker

Dear Skywalker,

I won't mind...much. I'll miss you, of course, but I'll understand. I think you should try out for the play. Maybe my parents will bust me out of Hogwarts to come and see it. I'll beg. They can't resist my puppy eyes.

I looked into the homeschooling thing. There is nothing really formal set up. You must send a letter to the Ministry when you are ready to take the exams for a certain year. That's all. They send you dates of the examinations during the summer. That's all. The person I spoke

to mentioned that a lot of people, more than we think, do home education instead of Hogwarts. I'll send you all of the homework assignments (except Divination! Please drop that worthless class!) so that you can keep up on the theory. I have no idea how you'll do the practical work. I'm sure that we can find a way. Please take care. May the Force be with you.

Love,

Hermione

Harry paused at the bulletin board to add his name to the list for tryouts. Paul was right. Harry could have fun with it. He only hoped that he would make it. He needed to prepare a monologue to perform. Well, Hermione had sent him all those Shakespeare books. He should be able to find something to perform in one of them. He would ask Paul. Maybe he would have some suggestions.

Harry turned and went to Paul's office, thinking over Hermione's latest letter. He could just test out of the sixth year and be ready for seventh year. He didn't think it would be too hard. At least he wouldn't have Snape ready to kill him for getting into NEWT potions. He had a funny feeling that his life wouldn't be threatened this year, like it had been for the past five years at Hogwarts. Voldemort would not be looking for him here. Voldemort was probably biding his time, just waiting for Harry to return to the magical world so that he could kill him. One thing that Harry had learned from those manipulative dreams was that Voldemort was intelligent and extremely patient. He was willing to wait for what he truly wanted.

Harry paused outside Paul's door and took a calming breath standing before Paul's door. He didn't want to worry Paul with his dark thoughts of death and dying. The thing that amazed him was the fact that learning about your enemy helped to dissipate some of the fear. Harry had never been afraid of Voldemort, only Voldemort's actions. Harry did not want to die. He did not want any of his friends to die either, though Dumbledore seemed determined to put all of them on the receiving end of Death Eater's curses. Harry shuddered as his mind told him he had done the same thing. No, I'm young and stupid.

Dumbledore knows better. He knocked and entered when told to do so. "Hi, Paul."

"Harry, come on in! What's new?" Harry put his school bag down and settled on the couch.

"Nothing much. I signed up to tryout for the play." Harry smiled at Paul's reaction. Stunned silence. "Wow. I've rendered you speechless. A first." Paul raised an eyebrow, reminding Harry of the Weasley twins.

"Speechless? I? Never. So you signed up for the play? What part? Actor, costume designer, set crew?" Paul asked, handing Harry a water bottle from his mini-fridge. Harry nodded his thanks and opened it.

"Acting. The announcement said that anyone who tried out and was not assigned a part could join the crew, so I'm going to be doing something with the play." Paul smiled and nodded, making a note in his book.

"That's great. Chess?" Paul asked.

"Can we take it outside?" Harry asked, brightening up. Paul smiled and got to his feet. Now that Harry had figured out that Voldemort was not going to appear out of nowhere and kill him, Harry used every excuse to go outside. Paul humored him, happy to see some of the fear that Harry carried disappear with each venture out. Harry jumped to his own feet eagerly and told Paul of his plans for his tryout piece. It seemed like Harry was going to use something from Shakespeare. The two of them settled at a picnic table and set up the board.

"I think you should do something from the history plays. They're not as popular as the tragedy plays and avoiding the whole 'to be or not to be' speech might make you stand out in their memories." Paul reached out and moved his knight. Harry frowned and studied the board.

“I don’t know. What if they don’t know the piece I choose?” He moved a pawn and sighed as Paul took it with his knight.

“The teacher is a drama teacher, Harry. He’ll know it, trust me. Your move.” Harry moved his bishop and took Paul’s knight. “Oh, nicely done! I didn’t see that trap.” Harry smiled at the praise and looked back at the board.

“Maybe I should try something from the plays Hermione suggested.” Harry said, trying to memorize all of the plays that Paul could make. Paul nodded.

“That could work. Your friend seems to have great taste. How’s your meditation coming?” Paul sent a rook after one of Harry’s pawns.

“Better since you helped me.” Harry sabotaged the attacking rook and sent another pawn after Paul. Paul looked down at the board and moved his own pawn forward. “My breathing becomes so automatic that it fades into the background. Now I focus on the ventilation system. The Occlumency book said that a common feeling experienced was a type of ‘losing yourself’. After that happens, I can’t even hear myself breathe anymore. I figured out that that was why I was losing my concentration.” Harry moved his queen and smiled at Paul. “Check.”

Paul looked down at the board. Harry was good but he could not... “Oh, no.” Paul moved his king out of harm’s way. “You almost had me.” He told Harry, who was still grinning.

“Almost.” Harry agreed. He moved his knight. “Paul?” Paul looked up from the board. “I...” Harry took a deep breath. “I don’t want to go back to Hogwarts this year.” There, he said it! Gryffindor bravery! “Can I stay here?” Ha! He was a Gryffindor! Paul looked up and realized Harry was afraid of being told he had to leave.

“I’m not letting you go anywhere else until you’re ready, Harry. Of course you can stay here.” Harry relaxed and smiled. Paul moved his next piece and smiled at Harry. “Check.” Harry studied the board and knocked his king over.

“How do you manage to put me in check three different ways?” Harry asked. Paul looked at the board.

“Three? I only did two.” Paul said, clearly perplexed as to how he had managed it.

“Only you, Paul.” Harry told him. “Only you can pull that off.” Paul smirked.

“Yes, that’s right. I am a chess master.” Harry laughed, nearly falling off his seat in the process.

“Have I ever told you about wizards’ chess?” Paul shook his head as he gathered the pieces. “The pieces move and shout out advice to the players.” Harry smiled at Paul’s face. “They each have their own personalities.” Harry put his pieces away. “Hogwarts has a giant chess set. Since the pieces actually hit each other, it gets brutal.” Paul’s reaction told him that a wizarding chess set would be ideal for Paul.

Harry rolled out of bed and stretched. He had an hour until he was due in the gym. He hurried through his morning routine and made it to the dining room in a short time. His usual breakfast was there waiting for him. He ate as quickly as and took off for the gym. Sensei and Rick were waiting.

They were already in the gym when he arrived. He needed no instructions and went to change. He pulled on his uniform and went back to the floor. “Stretch!” Harry and Rick, who had decided to share Harry’s lessons, both dropped to the floor and started stretching. Rick guided him through a new stretch and lectured on what muscle it was supposed to stretch. “Run!” Harry and Rick fell in side by side as they started to run the perimeter of the room. Sensei watched them run for a while, so long that Harry lost track of how many laps he managed to do before he wished that his legs would just fall off. “Stop!” Harry slowed and stopped. “Stretch.” Harry started to go to the ground when Rick stopped him.

“Trust me. Against the wall.” Oh, this was different. Harry leaned against the wall. “Give me a leg.” Harry raised one leg and Rick grabbed it. “Now, stop me when it hurts.” Harry nodded and let Rick push his leg up.

“Ow! Right there.” Rick stopped and lowered the leg a bit and held it in that position.

“Feel that pull?” Harry nodded. “This will give you some flexibility in your legs, which will help your kicks.” The two of them stretched until Sensei called a halt. He just motioned to Rick, who went to a trunk and pulled out focus mitts. “Get in your stance.” Rick said as he moved to the center of the floor. Harry put up his hands and his back heel. “When you see the cross on the mitt, punch. If the mitt goes down, like this, kick. If the mitt goes like this,” Harry instinctively ducked as the mitt came near his head “you duck. Good!” Harry smiled and kept his hands up. “Ready?” Harry nodded and started to follow Rick’s instructions as Sensei kept an eye on them. This is a lot of fun. Harry felt the mitt skim the top of his head. Oh, that was close. I love this! The two of them worked on that for almost ten minutes before Sensei called for them to stop.

“Water.” Harry nodded and headed over to the fountain. He stretched out his arms and sighed. He wasn’t tired yet. “Evan!” Sensei gestured for Harry to join him. Harry jogged over and smiled.

“Yes, Sensei?” Sensei gestured him to the mats.

“Break falls. Ten each side.” Harry nodded and started practicing his breakfalls. Sensei watched him while he spoke to Rick. After Harry finished his last set, he hopped to his feet.

“Done, Sensei.” Sensei nodded.

“Stretch.” Harry stretched out. Sensei motioned for him to join Rick. Rick had a bucket of golf balls next to him. “Put them in the other bucket.” Harry looked at the other bucket, the balls, and shrugged to himself. He picked up one and tossed it at the bucket. A miss. Hmm. He tossed another. Miss. He stopped after the last ball and frowned.

He had not managed more than ten into the other bucket. "Pick them up and then toss with your left hand." Sensei told him. Harry did as he was told and started with his left hand. Harry could not understand the golf balls, but Sensei surely had a purpose, right? "Enough." Harry stopped and stretched out his arm. "Relax." Harry nodded and took a deep breath. "Rick! Run with Evan outside."

Evan and Rick pulled on their shows and left the gym. "Rick, why do we run so much?" Harry asked as they started on their circuit of the grounds.

"You can't figure it out?" Harry shook his head. "Running is the best thing you can do in a fight." Harry's look gave away his thoughts. "It isn't cowardice. You run to help someone, you run for help. You come up against someone you know you can't beat. You run. Someone has a weapon. You disable them and run. All of those reasons are valid for running, but it also gives you a great body for the girls." Evan shook his head.

"You have girls on your mind a lot." He said to Rick as they turned the corner. Harry stopped when they turned the corner. Hermione was standing there, talking with Michelle and Julie from the martial arts class.

"Ah, it looks like I'm not the only one." Rick whispered. Harry shook his head

"Hermione's just a friend." He told Rick. Michelle looked up and smiled at Harry. Harry's heart did a little tap dance. Rick put a hand on his shoulder and bent down to whisper in his ear.

"Who said I was talking about Hermione?" Rick asked with a playful tone. Rick patted his shoulder and went towards the girls. "Good morning, ladies!" Harry stared after him. Words could not describe Rick. He was too good at what he did. "Ms. Hermione Granger! Good to see you again!"

"Hello, Rick." Hermione shook Rick's offered hand. Hermione looked past Rick and smiled at Harry. "Excuse me." She rushed over

to Harry and threw her arms around his neck. "Hi, Skywalker!" Harry smiled and hugged her back.

"Hi, Mi." He answered. Hermione pulled back and smiled.

"How are you?" She asked. Harry only smiled and gave her a thumbs up.

"I'm wonderful." He told her truthfully. Harry thought he heard Michelle or Julie mumble something along the lines of you can say that again but dismissed it.

"He's wonderful, but I'm afraid that he's also on a run that he must finish." Rick said, turning into a task master.

"That explains the sweat." Hermione smiled at Harry and moved away. "I'll see you after you are done."

"Julie, Shell, why don't you take Hermione here down to the dojo and let Sensei entertain her while Evan and I finish our run?" Julie and Michelle nodded eagerly, each taking one of Hermione's hands as they led her away. Harry thought he heard Julie ask Hermione if Evan had a girlfriend at all since Hermione was not it, but decided he really didn't want to know. Some things, especially girls' intimate conversation, he decided should be left alone except in dire circumstances. "Come on, Evan. Only six more times." Rick said in a cheerful voice.

"Oh, is that all?" Harry asked sarcastically, starting after Rick. He wondered what Jack had nicknamed Rick. Eternally-chipper? Bloody annoying? Too-much-energy-for-anyone's-good? Rick called to Harry again. Oh, definitely the second.

Author's Note: There you go guys! I'm finished with finals now, so my updates should become a little more regular!

“I know you all and will awhile uphold/The unyoked humor of your idleness./Yet herein will I imitate the sun/Who doth permit the base contagious clouds/To smother up his beauty from the world/That when he please again to be himself/Being wanted he may be more wondered at/By breaking through the foul and ugly mists/Of vapors that did seem to strangle him./If all the years were playing holidays/To sport would be as tedious as to work;/But when they seldom come, they wished for come/And nothing pleaseth but rare accidents./So when this loose behavior I throw off/And pay the debt I never promised/By how much better than my word I am/By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes/And Like bright metal on a sullen ground/My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault/Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes/Than that which hath no foil to set it off./I’ll so offend to make a offense a skill/Redeeming time when men think least I will.”

Harry stopped and looked at Hermione. “Word perfect!” She announced. “And just over a minute. Well done!” Harry smiled and sat back next to her. “I think that this speech was made for you, Harry.” She told him.

“I like it.” Hermione smiled and curled up on the couch.

“It does fit you, Skywalker.” Hermione assured him. “You and your people saving thing. Why do you feel the need to do it?” Harry shrugged.

“No idea. I guess that it is a part of what makes me, me.” Harry decided to change the topic. “So, what were you Julie, and Michelle talking about?” Hermione closed the Shakespeare book and tossed it onto the coffee table. She fussed with the hem of her shirt and gave Harry a coy smile.

“You.” She said with a giggle.

“Me?” She nodded, trying to hold her mirth in. “Why were you talking about me?” Hermione rolled her eyes and buried her face into her arms.

“You don’t see it, do you?” She asked. Harry was more than a little frustrated at this point.

“See what?” He demanded. Hermione sat up and looked around the room. She found what she was looking for and stood. She grabbed Harry’s hand and dragged him off the couch. “Mi! What?”

“That!” Hermione pointed to the mirror. Harry looked at it.

“It’s a mirror.” Hermione clenched her hands and sighed.

“And here I thought that only Crabbe and Goyle were this dense. Look at yourself in the mirror. Honestly.” Oh, look in the mirror. Brilliant, Potter. Harry turned to the mirror and looked. What? “Different glasses do a lot for you, Harry. Girls are seeing it and they love what they see.” Harry stared at himself, not knowing what to say. Small changes made big differences.

“Wow.” Hermione smiled and messed up his hair.

“I’ve made you vain! Be careful, or I’ll start calling you Lockhart.” She teased, still trying to mess up his hair.

“Oh, you wouldn’t dare!” Harry broke away from the mirror and turned to Hermione.

“I would.” She smiled. “Now, back to Julie and Michelle.” Harry stopped at the abrupt change.

“What about them?” he asked, afraid of what she was going to say. He collapsed back onto the couch and closed his eyes.

“They like you.” She told him, lying down on the couch. She nudged him to make room for her head.

“So? I like them too.” Hermione covered her face with her hands.

“Please, Harry. Don’t be dense.” She groaned. “They like you. They like what they see. They wanted to know if you had a girlfriend. Julie would like to be your girlfriend.” Harry blinked. Hermione couldn’t mean that...oh, no. Unfamiliar territory. Abandon ship! Abandon ship!

“Er...ah...” Hermione closed her eyes and smiled.

“Oh, good. You understand. Your brain just shut down.” Harry looked down at Hermione. His mind processed what she had said. He just wasn’t sure what to make of it. “You don’t have to do anything about it now. Just let them adore from afar. If you feel the need to ask one of them out, just write me. I’ll be happy to give you advice.” Harry decided to take the easy way out.

“Ah, thanks. So, tell me what happens in Star Wars.” Hermione opened her eyes and glared.

“No. You need to watch it.” Harry pouted.

“Please, Mi?” Hermione shook her head.

“You need to watch it.” She told him. “Ask Paul.” A voice from the door made them both jump.

“Ask Paul what?” Paul stepped through the door.

“Harry wanted me to tell him the rest of Star Wars. I told him that he had to see it.” Hermione sat up and ran her hands through her hair. “I mentioned that he should ask you.” Paul smiled and appeared thoughtful.

“We might be able to arrange something, provided that your floor has their homework finished.” Harry brightened.

“I’m pretty sure that they all finished. We had a study session last night. I can check at lunch.” Harry told him.

“That’s good, because it’s almost time for lunch. Hermione, you’re welcome to stay for lunch and the movie.” Hermione smiled.

“Could I call my parent’s mobile to let them know?” Paul nodded and motioned for Hermione to follow him.

“Oh, I love this stuff.” Hermione said, diving into her spaghetti and meatballs. Harry smiled. “Why don’t they serve this at school?” She asked Harry.

“I don’t know.” Harry told her.

“So, Hermione. Are you and Evan here going out?” Hermione smiled.

“I’m getting that question a lot today.” She answered with a laugh. “No. We’re just friends.” She told the table.

“How did you become friends?” Bug asked, chasing a meatball around his plate.

“Evan and his best friend Ron saved me from a troll,” Harry dropped his fork “of a boy in our first year.” She did that so smoothly. “Friends from then on.” She smiled. “Now I get to keep the two of them out of trouble and their heads in the books.” She smiled at Harry. Harry just stared at her.

“Need I remind you about the club you started?” Harry asked.

“Well, that professor was completely incompetent.” She looked around at the others gathered. “She was, trust me. It was only our grades, never mind she was so incompetent. And it wasn’t a club. It was a study group with definite goals and purpose.” She told Harry with her usual I’m right look on her face.

“You should be a solicitor. You sound like my dad.” Bug told her.

“I’ve thought about it.” Wow, that was news to Harry. “I’m drawn to several different professions. I’m still deciding.” She smiled. “Pass the garlic bread, please.”

“What do you want to do, Evan?” Harry looked up.

“An Au-, a police officer.” Hermione kicked him under the table. Harry kicked her back.

“Why?” Sparky asked. Harry shrugged.

“My father and godfather were one.” Harry took a deep breath.

“I think you’d make a better teacher.” Hermione said. “You should have seen his patience with one of our classmates. He never grew cross with him at all.” Harry glared at her. She smiled back.

“Is everyone finished?” Paul asked. The entire table stood. “Okay, guys. Down to the Rec room.”

The scene at the rec room mirrored Harry’s birthday party. There was a lot of pillow tossing and jostling for seats. Hermione found herself sandwiched between Harry and Bug. “All right, little Jedi. Settle down.” Paul smiled and switched on the video.

“Obi-wan never told you what happened to your father.” Harry stared at the screen. What was Luke doing?

“He told me enough.” Oh, he was courting death. Well, either way he went was death, but still. Hanging on something like that was not helping his chances. “He told me you killed him.”

“No.” So Vader hadn’t killed Anakin Skywalker? “I am your father.” Harry’s feelings matched his face. Absolute horror coursed through him.

“No. No. That’s not true.” Oh, Harry hoped it wasn’t. “That’s impossible!” Harry watched, afraid to blink.

“Search your feelings; you it to be true.” Harry stared at the screen. It couldn’t be true.

“No! No! No!” Oh, Harry agreed.

‘Luke. You can destroy the Emperor. He has foreseen this. It is your destiny. Join me, and we can rule the galaxy as father and son. Come with me. It’s the only way.’ Harry watched as Luke made his decision. Oh, no. Don’t jump Luke. Join him, but don’t die! Harry was surprised to find Luke alive after his fall. Why would Luke risk death? Harry thought that if he were faced with the same decision, he would have done the same thing.

“Luke.” Harry looked at the screen again. Oh, he knew those feelings.

“Father.” Harry shuddered.

“ Son, come with me.” Harry could almost hear Voldemort mentioning bringing back his parents.

“Ben, why didn’t you tell me?” YES! Why wasn’t he told? Why? Harry watched as the screen shifted back to Vader.

“Luke...it is your destiny.” Harry shuddered again. He hated those words.

“Ben, why didn’t you tell me?” Why wasn’t he told? Why did the old wizard keep such a secret from him? Why?

Harry watched the rest of the film in a daze. He understood the longing Luke had for his ideal father, the betrayal he felt, and the confusion. They each had been marked. It wasn’t fair.

“Evan? Walk me out?” Harry nodded and got to his feet. Hermione held his hand the whole way down the hallway. She told the attendant

at the desk that they would just be outside, waiting for her parents.
“Harry, what are you thinking about?”

“If Voldemort shows up saying that he is my father, I’m going to Avada Kedavra myself.” Hermione blinked before she laughed.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that, Skywalker.” Hermione told him. “He would have been pretty old when you were conceived.” Harry fought against a smile but finally cracked. “What?”

“Do you always think things like that?” He asked, sitting down under a tree.

“Mostly. I’m an insufferable know it all, after all. I have a reputation to maintain.” She smiled and nudged him. Harry pushed her back.

“I thought you hated being called a know it all.” Harry started playing with the grass at his feet. Hermione smiled again and joined Harry in building a construction of grass.

“I used to. Now, though, it’s different. If I make it my own, no one can use it against me. It has lost the power over me.” Harry thought about it before nodding. It made a lot of sense.

“I like your reasoning. Can I use it against the psycho one?”

“The Emperor?” She asked. “Sure!” Harry stopped his hand in mid-air, trying to work out who the Emperor could be. “Voldemort, Harry.” Harry collapsed on the grass in laughter and Hermione joined him just a second later.

“The Emperor! That’s great!” Harry rolled around in laughter. The two joked about Star Wars until Hermione’s parents came to get her.

I’ve decided not to go back to Hogwarts this year. Mi has said that she’ll keep me post on magical happenings, as long as I promise to keep improving. I don’t know what she considers improvement though. Thinking about Sirius doesn’t hurt so much now. The nice thing is that it’s allowed to hurt here. No one looks at you funny if

you're quieter than usual or if you look like you've been crying. They all do the same. It's nice, not having my friends look at me like I'm a puzzle, and then have them turn on me because I don't meet their expectations. Just...acceptance. It's something I didn't realize I needed until just a few days ago. I've always had it from Hermione and Ron too, except for that jealousy thing in fourth year. Now, I have it all the time.

Author's Note: Fifty-two reviews! You guys are just awesome. I love you all. Here's the next chapter. Chapter 15! I never thought that I would get this far. For those of you who are following Sylvia's story, she finally updated! Yay! Okay, some common questions:

Hermione telling the Protectors that DD is lying: yes, just not yet.

Star Wars Movies: Love them! The old ones. I haven't decided about the new ones yet. I am waiting to see the third one. They just fit Harry's situation.

Snape's involvement: Not until much later in the story. He will become involved when he gets hit with some hard truths about Harry, along with some help from a very stubborn Gryffindor. He and Hermione have had no contact yet, but he will be the only one to put it together and figure out who does know where Harry is, followed shortly by Draco.

Dumbledore knowing/ finding out: All I can say...yikes. He won't know what hit him. He doesn't know yet. Fireworks, people, fireworks.

The Order Knows/Doesn't Know: They don't know. The events Dumbledore mentioned to Petunia has something to do with that.

Pairing for the story: I can see why so many of you think it is Harry/Hermione. It's not. Hermione's just being a friend. There may be Harry/OC, but I'm not sure about that yet. Sylvia's given me a lot of leeway about this. (evil grin)

Draco's Role: Integral, I assure you. I won't say how though.

Harry's Return to Hogwarts: It will happen, though probably not in the way so many of you think it will. As for him deciding not to go back, check out the title. Dumbledore said that blood magic was not fully understood. There has also been mention that magic is stronger through force of will and emotions. That's all the hints I am dropping.

Harry and Jedi: Harry wants to be one. There will be more on that later.

The thing at the end of chapter 14: journal entry of Harry's.

Time Line: We have three weeks left until September 1st.

With that being taken care of, I just want to say thank you to each and every one of you. You guys just rock my little fanfiction world. Thanks for taking the time to respond to me.

On to the story...

Dear Mi,

I was re-reading parts of my journal and remembered a question I wanted to ask you when you were here. How was I able to tell Paul about my being a wizard without the Ministry storming in and locking me up? How does the law work?

Love,

Skywalker

Harry dropped the letter into the outgoing mailbox and waved goodbye to his friends as he walked down the hallway to Paul's office. He winced as his shoulders pulled. He stretched them a bit and sighed. He had yet to learn Sensei's motivations, but the man, it seemed, knew something Harry did not. Harry had tried to get answers from him, but Sensei was worse than Dumbledore in that respect. Where Dumbledore would drop clues, Sensei said nothing at all. It was a perplexing situation to Harry, one in which he was not quite sure he wanted to be involved. Let the man keep his secrets and mysterious looks; Harry had his own.

He had yet to tell anyone about his feelings concerning his decision not to return to Hogwarts this year. He had written to his aunt and told her, thanking her for doing what she had thought was best. Harry was thankful for what she had done. He was just afraid to do more than say thank you. Expressing his feelings to his family, he had learned, was a sure way to get him hurt. He hesitated to do that. Old lessons died hard.

Harry reached Paul's office and knocked on the door. He opened the door and smiled at Paul. A voice from the corner distracted him. "And behind door number three...a human! Yes, I know I'm amazing. I'll be here all week!" Harry laughed at the snake and settled on the couch.

"Yes, I have finally brought my snake in. I have some paperwork to finish up, if you don't mind?" Harry shook his head. "I'm almost finished, so you and he can have a quick chat. I'll be done in just a minute." Harry thanked Paul and moved over to the cage. Secretly, Paul had turned on a tape recorder and was watching Harry. He started in surprise when Harry responded to the hissing with some of his own.

"What are you staring at, four eyes?" The snake demanded of Harry. "Oh, the joys of speaking another language! I can insult you all I like!" The snake slid over its rock. Harry was sure that he was smug with himself. "And you can't do anything about it!" Oh, definitely smug.

"I beg your pardon." Harry answered him. The snake stopped moving and turned his head to stare at Harry. "I would rather you not insult me. I did not mean to offend you." The tongue slipped out twice as the snake seemed to consider its options.

"You speak." The snake said. "You speak very well. I have never met anyone who did such a thing. No humans at least." Harry smiled at him.

"There aren't very many of us." Harry answered. "May I ask your name?" Harry asked.

"I am called Zen, at your service." The snake reared up and affected a bow.

"Zen? Interesting name." Harry turned to Paul. "You named your snake 'Zen'?" Paul dropped his pen and looked at Harry.

"Yes...Zen told you?" Harry laughed at Paul's expression.

“You didn’t quite believe me, did you?” Harry asked. “It’s okay. I didn’t even know there was a name for it until my second year at Hogwarts. Let’s just say that went over well. ‘Harry Potter a Parselmouth? Being a Parselmouth is the mark of a dark wizard! Doom and devastation! The Gryffindor Golden Boy is a Parselmouth! Run away and hide!’.” Harry made his voice quite different for each sentence and ended on the couch collapsed in a heap. Paul smiled at Harry’s joking and poked Harry in the shoulder. Harry smiled at Paul and sat up.

“You’re in quite a mood today. What’s up?” Paul asked, setting aside his own work.

“Nothing really. I just found the magical world’s reaction quite humorous. So I can talk to snakes? Big deal. It’s like being left-handed.” Harry tossed his schoolbag on the ground.

“I love it when you use my analogies.” Paul said with a proud smile. Harry sat cross-legged on the couch and hid his face.

“Oh, stop. You’re making me blush.” Harry returned. “Anything you would like to ask Zen?” He asked with a grin. “I’m willing to act as an interpreter.” Paul stopped and thought for a few seconds.

“Is he happy?” Paul always wanted to know what his pet was thinking. Harry turned to face the cage and said something in the snake language.

“Zen, Paul, this guy here, would like to know if you are happy.” Zen cocked his head to the side and gave Harry what he thought was a snake smile.

“Warm lights and rocks, plenty of space, entertaining views, food. Yes, I am happy. Though you can tell...Paul, was it? ... that I am starting to get hungry.” Harry smiled at Zen’s response. “Here, mousey mousey, mousey!” Harry laughed at Zen and turned back to Paul.

“He said that he was content with his home, you know, enough space, warm lights and rocks, food, etc. He asked me to tell you that he’s starting to get hungry and then he said, ‘here, mousey, mousey, mousey.’” Paul’s face was enough to set Harry off into laughter again. “I think your snake has a great personality.” Harry pulled his favorite pillow to him and started tossing it in the air.

“Ooo, play thing!” Zen said from the corner, watching Harry play with the pillow. Harry giggled.

“I like you, Zen. Would you like to be friends?” Harry asked him. Zen slithered up to the front of the glass and fixed Harry with a stern look.

“That is dependent upon you telling me your name.” Zen said in a serious voice. Harry realized that he had forgotten to tell the snake his own name.

“I apologize. My name is Harry.” Harry told him. Zen bowed again

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Harry. I would be delighted to be friends with you. We can talk to each other. Maybe you will see what you can do about a mouse?” Zen asked. Harry promised him that he would see what he could do, but would not promise a mouse.

“So, how is your day going?” Paul asked, pushing away his paperwork.

“It’s fine. Can we go outside?” Harry asked.

“Ah, you can’t get enough, can you?” Harry smiled as he picked up the chess set. Harry smiled and shook his head.

“I’m determined to be a chess master by the time I’m ready to go back to Hogwarts.” Harry said.

“Ah, yes. That giant chess set. Yes. Now, the question is, how quietly can you sneak me into Hogwarts to see it?” Harry smiled and shrugged.

“Can we bring Zen?” Harry asked. Paul considered the fact that Harry could control the snake.

“If you can ask him to stay near us, I don’t see a problem.” Paul watched as Harry went over and talked to the snake. He slid the tape recorder into his pocket and watched as Harry put his arm into the tank. Zen slid up his arm and settled around Harry’s neck. “Did you ask him not to choke you?” He asked.

“Yeah. He won’t hurt me and promised to stay near us. He did say that he’ll want to stay on one of us, for the heat.” Harry told Paul. Paul smiled and slid a finger down the snake’s back. “Oh, he really liked that.” Harry told him.

“What did he say?” Paul asked.

“ ‘I am a puddle. Just a puddle.’.” Harry translated. “He’s quite a character.” Harry followed Paul out of the office. Maybe he would win today.

The next day...

Harry rushed out of literature class and down the hall. He had seen the drama teacher, Professor Bevington, walk down the hallway just minutes earlier with a folded sheet of paper in his hands. Harry was sure that that paper was the results of the auditions. He had never been so scared. Yes, he was right. There was a large crowd around the bulletin board. Various shouts of joy came from several people as they saw their names on the sheet. Harry joined the crowd and made it to the results. He stared at the sheet. They were doing King Lear. Harry hadn’t read that one yet. He scanned the list under Dramatis Personae and felt his heart stop.

Edmund – Evan James

“I made it.” He whispered to himself. “I made it.” He noted what time practices started – 4:00 pm that very day – and backed away from the board. “I made it.” He said to himself. He went to Paul’s office and

knocked on the door. Harry opened the door when he heard Paul call for him to come in and stood in the doorway.

“I heard the results were out.” Paul pointed to the ceiling. “There was a stampede of nothing less than elephants above me just a few minutes ago. Well?”

“You’re looking at Edmund!” Harry announced. “I’m Edmund!” Paul let out a little shout, which made Sky stop in the hallway and stare at them.

“Nothing’s wrong, Sky. Just a little celebration of theater parts.” Paul said, waving her away. Sky left, mumbling something about enthusiastic theater patrons. Harry chucked his schoolbag in its customary corner and flopped onto the sofa. “So, you made it to the actor’s list. Congratulations.” Paul reached into his little refrigerator and tossed Harry a Coke.

“Oh, thanks.” Harry waited until the fizz died down before opening it.

“I was wondering if you would allow me to start recording our sessions.” Paul asked Harry. Harry blinked.

“They won’t be used against me?” Harry asked.

“Most people would ask why I wanted to do so, or what I would use them for.” Paul said, pulling out the tape recorder. He raised an eyebrow. “Why did you ask if they would be used against you?” Paul set it down in front of Harry, but didn’t turn it on.

“I have enemies, Paul.” Paul made a note in his ever present notebook. Harry had enemies; Paul knew that, he just wondered how close they were to Harry that they would be able to threaten him. “Some would pay big money for some of the things in my head.” He said sadly.

“These recordings would not leave my office. They will help to cut down the amount of time I would take notes during our sessions and would allow me to focus more on what you’re saying at the time of the

matter.” Paul smiled a bit. “In fact, if it would make you feel better, I’ll erase the ones you really don’t want to exist after I’m done taking notes on it.” Harry pulled up his legs and wrapped his arms around them. He stared at the recorder. Paul realized that Harry was thinking. Harry brightened up and dropped his legs.

“I don’t know why I’m worried about it. Most wizards wouldn’t know what to do with things like that anyway.” He said, pointing to the recorder. “You can use it.”

“Thank you, Harry.” Paul switched it on. “Just speak normally and try to forget about it.” Paul advised him. A hiss from the corner caused Harry to look over there. Harry answered with a hiss of his own. “What did Zen say?” he asked.

“He said hello, and I told him hello back.” Harry listened to Zen for a few seconds before smiling. “He still wants a mouse, and he thanks you for taking him outside with us yesterday.” Paul smiled.

“Could you tell him he’s welcome, and that I’m sticking to his schedule on food and he will have another mouse at the end of this week?” Harry nodded and relayed the message. He listened to the response and laughed.

“He said ‘if you must’ and ‘I’m going to take a nap’.” Harry turned back to Paul fully. “You still get a little freaked out about me being able to talk to him, don’t you?” Harry asked.

“Why do you think I’m freaked out?” Paul asked.

“Aren’t you?” Harry returned to his position of pulled up legs.

“No, I’m fascinated.” Harry looked at Paul as though he was the one talking to snakes. “Try to understand it from my viewpoint. This is like you learning that you were a wizard.” Paul told him. “A whole new world has opened for me when you told me Zen was happy. I had no idea if he was or not. Now, I know that I’m at least doing something right.” Paul explained to Harry.

“Walking on your hands with an explanation, huh?” Harry asked. Paul smiled again and nodded.

“Exactly.” Paul told him. “Now, I have some serious things to talk with you about.” Harry nodded. “Oh, don’t look so down. They’re not so bad.”

“Okay. What are they?” Harry asked, toying with the pillow.

“When your aunt first contacted us, she and I had a long discussion. She told me a few things about the way you were raised.” Paul watched as Harry tensed up. Ah, unexplored territory. “I recommended that she and her family go into therapy as well.” Harry nodded. “She has followed my suggestion and their therapist and I have been in contact with each other. I haven’t told him anything you’ve said, just listened to him.” Harry nodded again. “I was wondering if you would be comfortable with having a joint therapy session. Their therapist would come and meet you, get to know you a bit, and then you all would meet.” Paul explained.

“Will you be there?” Harry asked. He would not be in a room with the Dursleys by himself if he could help it. He understood Aunt Petunia a little better after reading some of her journals, but Vernon and Dudley were unknown factors.

“For every second.” Paul told him. The doctor stopped and looked at Harry. “I feel that it will help you, but if you’re not quite comfortable with the idea, we can put it off until later.” Harry took on his thinking pose, as Paul called it, and closed his eyes.

“They were horrible to me when I was younger.” Harry said quietly. “Not quite abusive, at least, I don’t think so. There were times, though, when I wished someone would have called the police. I don’t know if I want to try to get to know them, or become a family, or whatever it is they want from me!” Harry grew progressively worse through his sentences.

“Breathe, Harry.” Paul counseled. He reached out and took Harry’s hands. “Look at me, Harry.” Harry took a deep breath and looked at

Paul. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to." Paul told him. Harry nodded. "Did they ever hit you, Harry? Touch you in inappropriate ways or places?" Harry shook his head. "Can you tell me what they did do to you?" Harry shook his head again.

"I'm not ready. Not yet." Harry told him. Paul frowned.

"Your actions are telling me that they did do something, like hitting you. Is that why you are afraid to talk about it?" Paul asked. Harry shook his head and stood. "Please, don't leave Harry." Harry pulled his schoolbag towards him.

"I'm...I'm not leaving." Harry dug into his schoolbag and pulled out a portfolio. "It hurts." Paul didn't have to ask what hurt. "They never really hurt me, but what they did was bad enough." Harry took a deep breath and let it out before continuing. "I drew some pictures." Harry handed several sheets to Paul. "They'll give you an idea. I...I just can't talk about it yet." Paul took the sheets and looked over them. They were pencil drawings, quite good drawings, but they gave some good information. Harry had labeled them. "Cupboard Under the Stairs", "Before Second Year", and "Accidental Magic" were scrawled across the bottom. Paul nodded and handed them back to Harry.

"I understand a bit better now. Thank you for showing me." Harry took them back and put them away. "We won't meet with them for now." Harry visibly relaxed. Paul looked at Harry, crashed on the couch, and smiled. Now, he looked like a teenager. "How are you?" He asked, wanting an update.

"I'll be okay. Thanks for understanding." Paul smiled.

"That's what I'm here for." He told Harry.

"I know. Thanks." Harry laughed as a hiss came across from the corner. Paul gave him a look. "I think Zen is dreaming. He went 'here mousey mousey mousey' again!" Paul snorted and Harry laughed again.

“Would it be okay if their therapist came and started to get to know you?” Paul asked. Harry thought for a few minutes before nodding.

“As long as you stay with me.” Harry told him.

“I’ll be right beside you.” Paul pulled out the chess board. “Chess?”

“I’m going to win!” Harry announced.

“Hmm, that’s what you think.” Paul told him. “Maybe Zen can give you suggestions.” Harry rolled his eyes and picked a piece. Black. “You’ve joined the Dark Side, I see.” Paul said. “Watch out, Vader. Here come the Jedi!”

[illegible]

Dear Skywalker,

I'm not sure why the Ministry didn't show up. The law implicitly states that a wizard may not reveal the magical world unless his life is in danger. Harry, I hesitate to ask, but you weren't suicidal, were you? Please tell me the truth. All I can say is that something out there is on your side, perhaps even magic itself. Who knows? I'm certainly not asking Dumbledore. Maybe you just got lucky. I'll try to figure it out. Take care. May the Force be with you.

Love,

Hermione

One week later...

Harry stood on the stage and faced the seats; his drama professor was the only one sitting there, but there was activity throughout the entire hall.

“Alright, Evan. Act One, Scene 2, line 121, if you please.” Harry glanced down at the script in his hand and nodded. “Let’s hear it.”

“This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune- often the surfeits of our own behavior- we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced-“

“HEADS!” Harry ducked, but the crash came from the backstage area. “Uh-oh.” A quiet voice said. Harry thought it sounded a lot like Bug, but he couldn’t be sure. “Guys, how fast do you think you can run?” Professor Bevington leapt onto the stage and rushed past Harry.

“What is going on here?” Wow, drama guy to teacher in 0.2 seconds. Several voices started speaking all at once. “Enough. Is anyone hurt?” Professor Bevington relaxed as the voices all answered that no one was injured. “Good. Evan, that’s enough for you today. Have someone read with you. You’re doing fine.” Harry recognized the dismissal, thanked him, and left the drama hall. He had time to answer Hermione’s letter.

Dear Mi,

At that point, I just wanted everything to stop. I didn’t care how really. Had it gone on much longer, who knows? I certainly don’t wish to die now. I plan on being around for a little while. Mostly just to annoy Voldemort. Just kidding.

I got a part in the play! I’m Edmund, Gloucester’s bastard son in King Lear. Cool, huh? The play runs from November 1st to the 4th. Family and friends are welcome. Let me know if you want to come, okay?

I’ve discovered muscles I didn’t know I had thanks to Sensei’s careful observation to unknown muscle groups. He told me that he couldn’t turn me into a super fighter, but that he would give me survival skills. I haven’t figured it out yet, but he said that I will understand soon. I sure hope so. Well, that’s all my news, Mi. May the Force be with you.

Love,

Skywalker

P.S. – Dumbledore equals Obi-wan Kenobi. What do you think?

Author's Note: Well, there you go! I hope you all enjoy. Please tell me what you think, and if you have any suggestions for improvement, let me know.

Author's Note: I finally saw Episode Three! I went with my friends Rickie and Sylvia to see it. It was better than the last two (thank goodness), but I still like the original trilogy the best. I hope you all like this chapter. It's a little shorter than the last, but we're coming down to the wire. We're getting close to Hogwarts, people! (Can you feel my excitement?) Hope you enjoy!

"I hope you have a good reason for dragging me out this early, Paul." Paul smiled at his old friend.

"Oh, of course, Joe. You know I wouldn't disturb your precious beauty sleep without a good reason." Paul offered him a cup of coffee, Joe's drink of addiction since their freshmen year, and smiled when the man attacked it.

"So, let's meet this patient of yours. The Dursleys talk about him, but they don't talk about him, if you know what I mean." Paul nodded and led Joe down the hallways. "Exactly why do you have me out at seven in the morning?" He asked.

"Oh, Harry's been up for almost an hour already. He's in class with his martial arts instructor, but it will give me time to brief you on him. Prepare you; I think should be the word I am using." Joe raised an eyebrow and rolled his eyes.

"Paul, you have such a flare for the dramatic. What's so special about him?" Paul put his hands in his pockets and shook his head. "Stop avoiding the issue." Paul glared at his old friend the best he could with a smile on his face and motioned to the stairs with his head.

"There are some things I can't, literally can't, tell you about him." Paul said as they rounded the corner to the gym. "It took me forever to find the tiniest flaw in his barrier, and believe me, I still haven't made it all the way through. It's like having your head stuck in a crack of a jail. You can see the outside, but that doesn't mean you're there." Joe followed his friend. "I don't want to betray his trust by telling you what he only told me in extreme distress, and had he not been ill at the time, I doubt he would have told me." Joe frowned.

“That is not going to help me with the Dursleys. Their nephew should be in therapy with them to solve the entire family’s problems.” Paul stopped before the gym door and shook his head.

“No way. He’s got some serious issues of his own before I want him to do sessions with his family. I asked about what life was like with them, and he panicked. Shut down. He entrusted some pictures he drew, but he wouldn’t tell me.” Paul pointed in the window. “He’s the short one.” He said with a smile.

“What are they doing?” Joe asked. “Just him and the instructors?” Paul nodded.

“Sensei asked for it, and he got it.” Paul explained. “Joe, there is something I should tell you about Harry, and that you need to know. I don’t know if the Dursleys have told you this, but Harry has been attacked more than once by the man who killed his parents. He seems set on killing Harry as well.” Joe turned to look in the window at the boy who was currently being tossed onto the mats. “If Sensei can teach him something that will save his life from that man, I will allow it.”

“Tell me that you are joking.” Joe said. “Tell me that this is one of those pranks you were so fond of while we were in school.” Joe looked at Paul’s face. “You’re not, are you?” Paul shook his head. “Why haven’t they gone to the police?” He asked.

“According to officials, the man is dead. Doesn’t exist. Harry knows otherwise, but no one, except for a few of his school officials, believes him. Those school officials do their best to protect him while he is at school, but that man finds him there year after year because that is where his parents went. He has special talents and that school teaches him what no other school can.” Joe turned back to the window and watched the boy as he pulled a helmet on his head and the teacher handed him...a wooden sword? What in the world? “Should he be doing that without more padding?”

“I trust Sensei with my life. Harry is safer in there than anywhere else in the world.” Paul told him. “Sensei Leonard instinctively knew that Harry had been in fights for his life before.” Joe looked at him in disbelief. “Yes, fights for his life. I haven’t got all the details, and I’m only telling you this to prepare you. Harry is extremely guarded and does not trust anyone easily. He may take a while to tell you something, if anything. Don’t expect to get a lot out of him.” Joe nodded and watched while the teacher went after the kid. He was surprised to see the kid handling the sword with some familiarity.

“Has he done this before?” Joe asked, motioning at the swordplay.

“No, today’s the first day. Harry’s been really excited about it.” Paul told him. “Cool, isn’t it? He picks up on weapons quickly, from what Sensei says.” Both men watched the fight until Harry’s legs were knocked out from under him and Sensei held him at sword point. Harry hopped to his feet as Sensei moved away and the two of them started at each other again. “He’ll be in the office in an hour. Let’s get you some more coffee and I’ll tell you just a bit about my work with him. Harry, though, I’ll allow him to show you what kind of person he is.” Joe nodded and moved away from the door, following Paul down the hall.

“Protego!” Ron shouted, trying to block Moody’s spell. The shield shattered and he fell to one knee. Moody stomped over and pulled him back to his feet.

“Again, boy! Hold nothing back! Hesitation will do nothing but get you killed!” Ron nodded and readied himself again.

“Expelliarmus!” Moody shot the spell towards Ron. Ron raised his wand and said the counter spell he had been ordered to use.

“Protego!” Ron watched as his shield held and the other spell ricocheted off to hit the boundary spell and dissipate.

“Better!” Moody said happily. He waved his wand towards the boundary spell and the area around the dueling floor shimmered. “Take a knee, all of you.” The other Protectors gathered around Ron

and sat. Neville passed Ron a bottle of water. "The enemy has no mercy." Moody started. "It is kill or be killed. The Death Eaters will not hesitate to kill you; you must not hesitate to attack them or kill them if you must. They do not have a conscience; you cannot appeal to their mercy, for they have none." Moody was pacing back and forth in front of his trainees, trying to impart some of his hard-earned knowledge, as well as some of Dumbledore's lessons. "You can trust only each other on the battlefield. No one else." He paused. "What is your prime objective?"

"To fight against evil, sir." The recruits, save one, repeated.

"Who are you to protect?" Moody growled.

"The innocent, the weak, and those who fight against evil, sir." The children, except one, repeated.

"What is your primary charge?" Moody stopped and faced them.

"To protect and guard the Boy-Who-Lived, even if it is from himself, sir." Moody nodded. They had learned their lessons well.

A shape in the shadows watched the proceeding with a firm sneer. He disagreed with those ideas, this training, and the whole project. These were children. Annoying dunderheads, yes, but children. He eyed every one of them. Some were surprises. Longbottom, for one. He had turned out to be quite a remarkable dueler, all thanks to that little clandestine study group the Golden Trio had run last year. They thought that no one knew. He did. He had watched many a session, just as he was doing right now. What no one, not even the omniscient Dumbledore knew, was that the Head of Slytherin House had a secret passageway to this room in his quarters and had often used it to exercise on his own. Heaven forbid anyone should find out, but you didn't survive long as a spy if you couldn't run from your enemies. The DA had almost walked in on him more than once, and he couldn't resist watching students break the "Headmistress Umbridge" rules. Especially with the insufferable know it all being a part of it all and her penchant for following rules.

Now he used it to spy on these proceedings, knowing to his core that this was wrong. It would be an even harder year for Potter...He quickly squashed any feelings of pity. Pity only got you killed. His best friends would be spying on him, "for his own good". Snape almost snorted. Too much was done for that boy's own good, and all of it so far had ended in disaster. Dumbledore's guards from the Order had been pulled from the Dursley's residence and Potter's home when Hogsmeade had been attacked. Dumbledore had "reorganized" the wards so that they would know when a wizard approached the house, but even Snape could point out that anything could happen in the time it took to get there. Snape loathed Potter, that was true, but he didn't want him to die. The Pensieve incident came to mind and he pushed it away. Okay, he had pure loathing for that spoiled brat, but he still didn't want him to die. He had been trying to protect Potter from those images of his father. Who was he to disabuse the boy of his valued father with proof? He had simply enjoyed needling Potter into response so he could assign detention. Potter needed the real world, and Snape gave it to him. Fantasy was not going to save his life. Fantasy, and this little club of Dumbledore's. What a horrible idea. He masked his feelings. Dumbledore could not know these thoughts.

"How are you to do that?" Moody seemed like he wanted to stump them all. With Draught of the Living Death. That is the only way to keep Potter in one place long enough to save his life. Severus thought. He turned his attention back to the children. No one seemed brave enough to take the question.

"As discretely as possible, so we do not arouse his suspicions, sir." Draco called out. There was another surprise. Just before all this madness known as Summer Studies started, Draco had appeared at the gates of Hogwarts beaten with several broken bones. He had only a bag with him and his wand. He spent nearly a week in the hospital wing under Pomfrey's care. When questioned, the only details he would give were that he had seen a Death Eater's meeting and had refused the Dark Mark.

"I grovel to no one." He had told Severus when he had asked why. "Turn me in if you wish. I still won't bow to him." Severus had left spying shortly before Draco had come to Hogwarts. His Mark had

burned almost continuously from that day on, making him more snappish, but he told Draco his secret, and had received a surrogate son in return. Draco stayed in the Protectors' dorm, true, but he spent a lot of time with Severus when he wasn't required to be with the others training or studying. Severus had not realized what a comfortable situation having another person around could be.

"Yes! Discretion is vital in protecting of a target." Moody said with pride. "Well done, Malfoy."

"Thank you, sir." Draco answered. Oh, the boy could play the game well.

"Harry Potter is a volatile person. He is emotional, illogical, and extremely vulnerable. It will be up to you to keep him safe." Snape left the Room of Requirement, thankful for the magical shield that protected him from Moody's eyeball, and went back to the room the normal way. Few knew the secrets of Slytherin House, and even less knew how to use them, but as Head of House, he had some certain privileges that others would never have. Salazar Slytherin had his own methods of choosing Heads of House, regardless of the Headmaster or Headmistress. That much Snape knew, and he would never share until another was chosen for Head of House.

He opened the doors and stood in the doorway. Intimidation. Anger. Supreme power. Longbottom exploding a cauldron. Gryffindor winning the house cup. His mental thoughts worked well. The students all seemed to shrink under his gaze. I love my job. "I've come for my trainees." He drawled. He folded his arms as though he could care less and waited.

"You've done well today." Moody said. Oh, that's right. Stroke their little egos. Set them up for failure. Well done, Mad-eye. "Malfoy, Lovegood, Weasley, Brown, Patil, Spinnet, Bones, Johnson, and Macmillan, report to Professor Snape." Snape turned and left the doorway, causing the students to run after him. He vaguely heard the Patil twins question which one was to go and Moody answered the Gryffindor one, because he couldn't tell them apart. The girl came running after Snape's group. Well, at least she was the one capable

of turning out an acceptable potion. The Ravenclaw one was too bookish to do well in a practical setting. Good grades, yes, practical ability, no.

“Take your seats. Instructions are on the board. I must remind you that one mistake in this potion will likely remove all of the skin from your faces.” Severus stopped to see who had done their reading. Draco smirked and ducked his head to hide his laughter, while Lovegood retained her always vacant expression. Severus glared at Weasley, who looked panicked. Perfect. “Get started.” He conveniently forgot to mention that any explosion would cause the best moisturizing cream known to wizarding and muggle kind. Why ruin his fun to reassure them?

Hermione stumbled out of bed to kill her alarm clock. She pummeled the snooze button without mercy and sunk back under her comforter. She buried herself in her blankets and proceeded to rendezvous with the wizard of her dreams. Nine minutes later found her muttering hexes under her breath, hands itching for her wand. She hit the snooze button to stop the annoying beeping and turned off the alarm. She missed many Muggle things at Hogwarts, but this...destroyer of dreams known as an alarm clock was not one of them by any stretch of the imagination.

After her hot as the sun shower, she dressed, grabbed one of her Hogwarts robes and went down the stairs. An Order member would be escorting her and her parents to Diagon Alley to shop for her school supplies. Hermione knew that getting Harry's books would be difficult, but she was determined to do as she promised. “Morning, Mum.” Hermione collapsed at the kitchen table and put her head down on the table.

“Good morning, sweetheart. You look tired.” Hermione picked her head up as her mother slid a plate in front of her.

“Oh, thank you.” She picked up her fork and started on her eggs. “I'm not tired. My stupid alarm clock interrupted a great dream. I nearly sent it out the window.” She swallowed her bite and smiled. “This is great, Mum.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, a letter came from you.” Hermione thanked her and ripped it open. She relaxed at Harry’s explanation and smiled.

“Harry got a part in the play. He’s Edmund from King Lear. Sensei’s working him hard.” She smiled as her mother nodded. “He says that Dumbledore equals Obi-wan Kenobi. I can see it. I mean, both are old wizards who had something to do with their charge’s life. Obi-wan placed Luke with his aunt and uncle, Dumbledore placed Harry with his aunt and uncle. Both knew the child’s father and past.” She stopped at her mother’s amused look.

“You kids and that movie.” Dr. Granger laughed and shook her head.

“Mum!” Hermione said. “Don’t tease.”

“Oh, I won’t.” She knelt down next to her daughter’s chair and looked her in the eye. “Just don’t become one of those people who dress up and go to parties.” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Make sure that letter is put away.” Hermione finished her breakfast and left to go to her room. She paused in the doorway.

“You know, Mum. I never thought of that before. Harry would really enjoy dressing up like Luke. Maybe we could get the patterns from the Internet and aah!” She ran from her mother who came after her with the spatula. She brushed past her father on the stairs. “Brace yourself, Dad! Mum’s gone mad!” Her father stared after her before continuing to the kitchen.

“You’ve gone mad?” He asked. His wife sighed.

“She was teasing about dressing her and Harry up as Star Wars characters.” Dr. Granger gave a little theatrical shudder and kissed his wife.

“Anything but that.” He said in a jovial tone. “I wonder what I did with those pictures?” He mumbled.

“If you even think of showing those pictures to her, I will make you cook your own meals.” Her husband smiled up at her.

“Thank God for carryout.” He ducked as the spatula flew at his head. His daughter was right. She had gone mad. Good thing he was in love with her when she didn’t have a spatula in her hand.

“Nuts, the both of you.” She told him, finding a new utensil. “Of all the traits you had to pass onto her, you had to give her a science fiction gene!” He looked up from the table, offended.

“Who says Star Wars is fiction?” He demanded. Dr. Granger could only roll her eyes at her husband. A crash from the hallway told them that their Order escort had arrived.

“Hi, Tonks!” Hermione said brightly. Both adults had to fight a groan. Tonks was a disaster waiting to happen.

“We don’t have to go anywhere with breakables, do we?” He asked his wife.

“I hope not.” She told him. She went to offer breakfast, wondering if she should protect her dishes from the Auror. They had only met her once, but it was enough to give Hermione’s parents a lasting impression. Hermione’s father sat at the table, wondering where he had left his pictures of his Skywalker and Darth Vader costumes. In the attic, perhaps? More importantly, where were the costumes? He was sure that he still had them.

“Mom, Dad. Distract Tonks. I need to get Harry’s books.” Hermione whispered as Tonks apologized to each shopkeeper on the Alley for knocking over a display. Her parents both nodded and she ducked into Flourish and Blotts.

“Hello, Hermione!” She smiled at the clerk who seemed to have grown fond of her. “What can we do for you today?”

“I need two copies of each sixth year book on this list.” She handed him her list and he nodded.

“I’ll get my son on this.” He motioned to a rather owlish looking boy who ran forward and shyly smiled at Hermione. Hermione vaguely recalled him from Hogwarts, but he had been at least four years above her and she couldn’t remember his name. She smiled back at him as he took her list and left. “I can see some questions burning in there. What extra materials do you need this time?”

“You know me so well. First, I want to thank you for the excellent Occlumency book, Mr. Arcane.” The man smiled. “It was a huge help.”

“Glad you liked it, Hermione.” She looked at her secret list.

“I was wondering if you have any books on wandless magic.” Mr. Arcane looked at her.

“And why would you want that?” He asked. “Heavy reading.” He told her.

“I’m curious.” She told him. “The idea fascinates me. Magic without a wand. It makes me think.” Mr. Arcane led her to the back of the shop. He ghosted his hands over the shelves, apparently searching for the right book.

“I will warn you, Hermione. Very few wizards manage it, even less can manage more than a simple spell. It’s a very complicated and archaic form of magic. You will not find many good sources here.” He pulled out a book and handed it to her. “I can contact my friend at the other store, if you would like.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Arcane. That would be wonderful. I will appreciate any sources you can find for me.” Mr. Arcane smiled down at her.

“Still hate that restriction on some books at Hogwarts, eh?” He asked.

“More than ever. How can they restrict knowledge that way?” Mr. Arcane smirked and handed her another book. She smiled and then followed him up to the register. If all he would give her was these two books, that was all Flourish and Blotts had to offer and she would have to wait for the other book.

“Some people feel that certain knowledge is not good in the hands of the general public.” He told her. His son came stumbling up to the register and dropped the stack on the counter. She thanked him and watched as he turned red and backed away. “Did Harry enjoy the Occlumency book?” He asked in a whisper. Hermione’s jaw dropped before she could stop it.

“How-, how did you know?” She asked.

“Mmm, I know many things, Hermione. I keep many secrets and will keep your secret and his as well.” Hermione relaxed. “So, did he enjoy it?” He asked with an affable smile and an obvious eagerness.

“Very much. He said it helped a great deal.” Mr. Arcane smiled and clapped his hands once.

“Excellent!” He reached under the counter and pulled out two little books. “I’ve been saving these for you since I had suspicions that you and he were in clandestine contact.” Hermione looked at them and raised an eyebrow.

“What are these?” She asked.

“Mini-Messengers.” He told her. “They’re not to be put on the market until Christmas, but I thought that they were perfect for you and your friend.” He flipped one open and unlined pages met Hermione’s eyes. “They look like a planner, or a journal. They can be linked to another book,” He held up the other “and you and the other person can communicate back and forth. The words are coded once you shut the book and you must say the password to reveal the writing. They are endless, so you never run out of fresh paper.” He closed the book. “I can also emboss a name on them, if you would like.” Hermione

looked at the books. They did indeed look like a tiny journal or planner.

“They’re perfect!” She told him. “This will solve many problems this year.” She picked one up. “I’ll take them. Could you put ‘Skywalker’ on one and ‘Mi’ with an ‘I’ on the other?” Mr. Arcane waved his wand and smiled as Hermione’s own smile brightened. He had never met such a curious witch before and Hermione was in a league of all her own when it came to studies. “Password?” He asked.

“Light saber.” She said. Mr. Arcane raised an eyebrow but said nothing as he keyed the books to the password. “Thank you so much, Mr. Arcane.” The man nodded and rang up the books.

“Hermione, why are there six different books on potions?” He asked. The girl only grinned.

“Professor Snape won’t know what hit him this year.” She said with an evil little glint in her eyes.

“Good luck to the professor, then. I’d hate to be on the receiving end.” He noticed a pink-haired woman coming towards his shop. “I’ll send you those references you asked about by owl later, okay?” She nodded as he packed up the books into bags and shrunk the other set. “These will return to normal about six o’clock this evening.” He told her. She gave him a conspiratorial smile and nodded.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Arcane, for all of your help. Is it possible for you to copy those resources?” She asked.

“Anything you wish, my dear. I’ll send them along.” She thanked him again and lugged her bag towards her parents.

“Hermione, you can’t run off like that.” Tonks lectured. Oh, ticked Aurors were not pretty sights.

“I know, Tonks. But you were taking so long and the books were calling to me and..” Tonks cut her off and ushered her to the door, muttering about obsessive bookworms. Hermione only smiled. She

had gotten away with it. Tomorrow she could visit Harry and give him his books. Look out, Protectors. They wouldn't know what hit them either. Half of the Defense books she had on her list weren't requested by the teacher.

Author's Note: Thanks for reading. Please let me know how I'm doing. Sylvia is scribbling away in her room and has basically left me on my own with a muttered "you're doing fine". Her Muse has called and I haven't seen her except when she's scavenging for food in our nearly bare kitchen. Yeah, we need to go grocery shopping. Please review and save me from thinking about pizza. Mmm, pizza!

Author's Note: The amount of reviews for the last chapter was amazing. Thanks to all who reviewed. In total, 90 of you felt my story warranted a review. You have no idea how that makes me feel...honored, amazed, and humbled. I have just a few responses and then we will continue to the story!

Harry meeting with the Dursleys: Eventually.

Getting chapters faster: I think an update a week or every ten days is pretty good. Sorry.

Dumbledore finding out about Harry: September first, of course.

Hermione not a Protector: There is a very good reason as to why Hermione is not a Protector. Think hard. You'll figure it out. You all are so smart! ;)

Harry staying at St. Jude's: You'll find out later.

Return of the Jedi: No idea. I have it in my notes, but they're scattered about at the moment. He'll be quoting ROTJ lines with Hermione soon enough. Don't worry.

The lone Protector: You know the one who wasn't answering questions? He's not a Gryffindor.

Guards around Harry's house: They were pulled and sent to protect Hogsmeade. Read chapter 16 again. The full explanation is in there.

Wandless magic: A Jedi's power flows through the Force...

Hermione learning with Harry: She's Hermione. What do you think?

Joe and Evan James: Paul uses Harry, and so will Joe. They will both be his therapist; Paul will be Harry's individual and Joe will be family. That and the family mentioned Harry. Not Evan.

Harry's return to Hogwarts: Yet herein will I imitate the sun. I'm sure you understand my meaning.

Hermione's return to Hogwarts: Yes, she is going back.

Sensei knowing something: Sensei knows many things.

critic unknown: Your review left me speechless. I do plan on going professional, but not quite yet. I have to go to law school first. Thank you for such wonderful encouragement and an offer to buy my books. I will let you know when I do start writing professionally. As for your speculation: you got it in one! Congratulations!

Koobie Kippers: You paid me a very high compliment. Better not let JKR find out! ;) Thanks for reviewing and encouraging me.

Okay, gang. I'm stopping the reviews here so ffn doesn't kill me and take my story down. I've been warned. There are too many reviews to answer here. If you would like an answer, include your email address and I will email you. You all have been phenomenal and wonderful. I send out virtual chocolate, cookies, pizza and pickles to all. I'm still speechless. On to the story!

"Come in!" Paul said when he heard Harry knock. Harry was here for his appointment. Harry came in looking relaxed, but that changed the minute he saw Joe sitting in a chair next to Paul. "Hi, Harry." Harry nodded, still staring at Joe. "Harry?" Harry looked at Paul, eyes questioning the other man's presence. "Do you remember when I asked about bringing the Dursley's therapist here?" Harry nodded again. "This is Joe, the Dursley's therapist." Joe stood and went over to Harry, extending his hand to Harry. Harry took it cautiously and shook it lightly before dropping it.

"It's nice to meet you, Harry." Joe said in his softest voice.

"Likewise." Harry said, still eyeing the man.

"He speaks!" Paul fell out of his chair and onto the floor. The action had the desired effect. Harry snorted and relaxed enough to smile. "I've not heard you so quite since you saw The Empire Strikes Back!" Paul told him. Harry rolled his eyes and sat down on the couch, still wary, but willing to trust Paul's judgment about this man.

“Yeah, well.” Harry ducked his head before looking back up at Paul. “Finding out that Darth Vader is Luke’s father was pretty traumatizing.” Harry stopped and looked at Paul suspiciously. “What else haven’t you told me?” He demanded in a serious voice. Paul smirked and slouched in his seat.

“A great many things, young Jedi.” Paul took on a haggard appearance and imitated the Emperor’s voice from the movie. Harry looked at him with wide eye and shuddered. “A great many things.”

“Don’t do that. It’s creepy.” Harry said, tossing his bag in the corner. He felt his wand against his leg. He had a defense against this man, this...Joe. Harry studied him again. He looked like a typical Muggle. Too typical. Of course, that didn’t mean anything. Harry wanted to smack himself. He was becoming as paranoid as Mad-eye!

Paul got up from his seat and went over to the fridge and started digging. So what if it was before lunch? Harry could have a soda. He needed one, and he was sure Joe would appreciate more caffeine. In fact, if he played this right...

Joe studied Harry, who was also studying him. He was a small teenager. He did not take after his cousin and uncle, but more like his aunt. His stare was intense, but he didn’t make eye contact. He didn’t need to. Joe could read his feelings through body language alone. Harry did not like him...yet. He didn’t trust him either. He was sure that once he and Harry had met a few times they would become friends. Paul had been right. Harry was one tough kid. Joe jumped in surprise as a bottle of soda flew at Harry. Harry reached up and caught it without looking at it! His face must have shown his surprise, for Harry raised an eyebrow before setting the soda aside and smirking.

“Use the Force.” He told Joe. Joe smiled and shook his head.

“Sorry, I can’t do that Jedi stuff.” Paul handed him a bottle of soda. “So, that’s how you did it?” He asked Harry. “The Force?”

“Harry’s a regular Jedi. Or so he thinks. I think he just has really good reflexes. Something to do with sports at school.” Harry smiled again and nodded.

“Yeah, that’s it.” He told Joe. Quidditch was a sport. Joe didn’t need to know which. “Sports at school. I need to protect my head from flying objects, and we don’t wear helmets for that.” Joe nodded his understanding and took a long drink from his soda. Ah, caffeine. The source of his power.

“So what do you play?” Joe asked.

“Football on my house team.” Harry said. Nice save, Harry. Bravo! Okay, so Joe was...different. More serious than Paul, he guessed. He felt his wand again. It was still there.

“That’s good. Do you enjoy school?” Joe asked. Harry smiled. This conversation sounded familiar. Much like his first conversation with Paul. Harry chanced a quick glance at Zen’s cage. Oh, the snake was sleeping. That wasn’t fair.

“Oh, yeah. Well, the work I do. Some of the teachers. Sports, definitely.” Harry told him. Wand was still there.

“Does your leg hurt you?” Joe asked. Harry jerked his hand away and shook his head.

“No, my muscle’s just a little sore from practice. I’ll put something on it later.” Note to self: do not touch wand again. Joe eyed him, but dropped it. “What do you like to do?” Harry asked. Joe smiled and thought for a few minutes.

“Well, let’s see. I like to read.” Paul snorted. “Do not call me a bookworm, Paul. You do it too.” Harry smiled.

“What do you like to read?” Harry asked.

“Oh, my favorites are Sherlock Holmes and Shakespeare.” He told the boy. He had the surprise of his life when Harry gave a huge smile and sat up.

“What’s your favorite play?” he asked excitedly. Joe blinked in surprise while Paul groaned.

“Have fun, Joe. Harry here is a regular Shakespeare enthusiast.” Paul watched in satisfaction as the two chattered back and forth about the different plays. Joe turned Harry’s attention towards the sonnets and longer poems as worthy of his perusal, while Harry quoted favorite parts of plays he had read. Joe easily returned with the other parts.

“Oh, you can help me with me lines!” Harry said while pulling out the small book of King Lear Professor Bevington had given him so he didn’t have to lug his big book around. Paul smiled and allowed the two of them to get to know each other. Joe seemed to be having fun and Harry was starting to relax. Paul stopped them when it was time for lunch.

“Attention all Shakespeare nuts: It is time for lunch.” Paul said, switching off the tape recorder. Harry let out a good-natured groan. “Go on, Harry. Joe and I will come down in just a few minutes.” Harry got up and gathered his bag.

“When will you be here again, Joe?” Harry asked.

“Same time next week.” Harry nodded and said good-bye to both men. Joe gave Paul a satisfied smile and relaxed into his chair. “And you said that he was hard.” Paul smirked and shook his head.

“What makes you think that you got in?” Paul asked. Joe sat up and stared at Paul.

“Are you saying that what I saw was nothing more than a front?” He asked. Paul pushed the rewind button on the recorder and nodded.

“Joe, I hate to tell you this, but I think that the Harry I deal with on a daily basis is still a front. I have seen maybe one or two glimpses, I think, of the real Harry in all the time he has been here.” Paul looked at his friend’s distraught face and shook his head. “Not to burst your confidence about him or anything like that.” Joe waved the comment away. He had thought that he was doing so well with the boy. “If it’s any consolation, he talked to you more than the first time he met me.” Joe nodded a bit, still staring off into space.

“It helps, thanks.” Joe told him.

“No problem. Come on. I’ll feed you before I let you leave. I think I smell macaroni and cheese from here.” Paul pulled Joe from the office and led him down to the dining hall.

Harry was in his room studying for his test on Monday when Jack knocked on the door. “Hey, 007.” Harry looked up. “Your girlfriend’s here.” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” Harry told him. Jack smiled.

“I know. Hermione’s here and she brought more books. I think that I smelt brownies too.” Harry jumped up from his desk and bolted for the stairs.

“Thanks, Jack!” Jack watched him run down the hallway. He was excited, so Jack wasn’t going to run the mood. Let him run.

Harry skidded around the corner and nearly barreled into the opposite wall. He regained his footing and turned to the sitting room where Hermione usually met him. He went in the door and looked around. Hermione got up from the couch.

“Who’s Luke’s father?” he asked.

“Duh, Darth Vader.” Hermione tackled him in a hug and released him when they both started to fall to the ground. “It’s good to see you.” She hugged him again. “Want to go outside?” She asked.

“Sounds great.” He helped her with the packages and told the attendant that they would be just outside and would stay in view of her. She nodded, giving Harry an odd smile and shooing them out. “What’s that all about?” He asked Hermione.

“No idea.” She told him. The two of them settled under a tree and Hermione opened the box of brownies. “Mum sent these along.” She gave Harry one and took one for herself. “I got your books for sixth year, a few other surprises. I have copies of everything, so if you have any trouble, just write me and I’ll tell you what I know.” Harry dug into the bag and pulled out the books. He stared at the pile and then at Hermione.

“These are all of the sixth year books?” He asked.

“Of course not. I added some to your list. Why do you think that my grades are so good? I use sources other than the textbook to write my essays.” Harry counted the number of potions books and looked at her.

“Seven?” He asked. Hermione smiled and pulled out a rather tattered looking one.

“This was mine for my first year. I think that you could use it now. I don’t know why I haven’t thought of it before.” She handed it to him and he looked at the title. A Muggleborn’s Guide to Potions: How to Survive the Dungeon. Harry smiled at the title.

“I always wondered how you did it.” Harry told her. “Thank you, Mi.” She smiled at him and nodded at the pile of books.

“You’re on the fast track. Snape won’t know what hit him when you get back to school.” She gave an evil grin, which Harry returned with equal force. “Besides, we need to get you ready for some outstanding school work.” Harry nodded again.

“Mi, I was wondering something.” Harry told her.

“What’s up, Skywalker?” She asked. “What do you need?” Harry stared off into space for a few seconds before answering.

“I need to know what the Summer Studies students are learning. Everything they are learning. Do you know any way that we could find that information out?” Hermione frowned and chewed on her bottom lip. That would be difficult. Not impossible. Just extremely difficult.

“It’s possible. I’ll see what I can do.” She told him. Harry nodded, thanked her, and turned back to the books.

“Mi, what’s this?” He asked, holding up a small black book. Hermione’s smile grew wide and she pulled out an identical one. Harry looked at his and found “Skywalker” on it.

“It’s called a Mini-Messenger.” She told him. “Say ‘lightsaber’.” Harry raised an eyebrow again but said the word. “Now open it.” Hermione opened hers and scribbled something into it with a pen she found in her pocket. Harry looked at his first page and was amazed to see two words appear on it. Hi, Skywalker.

“Mi! This is so cool!” He snatched the pen and wrote his own message. Hi, Mi! Hermione giggled and closed her book.

“We can write messages back and forth. They are endless, so we’ll never run out of paper. Our writing is encrypted, so we’re the only ones who can read what the other person writes. If a person doesn’t know our password, they can’t read it.” She told him.

“This will be such a big help.” He told her. Hermione nodded.

“Check it daily for lecture notes and homework assignments.” She told him sternly. Harry nodded seriously and closed his own book. “I picked light saber for a reason.” She told him. He looked up and she gave another evil grin. “These are our weapons against Dumbledore. An elegant weapon for a more civilized age.” She told him. Harry smirked at the line quote from Star Wars.

“Pen is mightier than the wand?” he asked. Hermione nodded enthusiastically. “I like that.” Hermione shrugged and poked Harry with a stick. Harry glanced at her and pushed the stick away. She poked him again. Harry grabbed his own stick and poked her back.

“The Force is with you, young Skywalker, but you are not a Jedi yet.” Hermione said, getting up and pointing her stick at Harry. Harry got to his own feet and grinned. The two started a lightsaber battle with their sticks. “You have learned much, young one.” Hermione said, trying to imitate Darth Vader’s voice.

“You’ll find that I’m full of surprises.” Harry said with a little grin. He dodged Hermione’s stick and returned her move. The two of them fought their way across the yard, back and forth in front of the window. Hermione giggled and fought against Harry for a few more minutes before stopping the match.

“ Impressive.” She said, trying to catch her breath. “Most impressive.” Harry gave her a little impish grin and dropped the stick. Hermione tossed hers aside. “What are you doing, Skywalker? Is Yoda in there training you?” She asked. Harry shook his head and smiled.

“I’ve got Sensei.” Harry told her. Harry returned to the books and gathered them up into the bag. “Um, Mi? What’s this?” he held up a book.

“Wandless magic, Skywalker. I think that it will be interesting to study it, see what we can make of it. There should be another book in there about it.” She told him.

“The Force.” Harry said. Hermione smiled.

“Perfect code word. The Force.” Hermione helped him with the books and they both sat down again. “So, code words. Dumbledore is Obi-wan, Voldie’s the Emperor, you’re Skywalker. Hmm. Who’s Darth Vader?” She asked. Harry shrugged. “Ron’s Han Solo.” Harry shook his head.

“Nah, make him Chewie.” Hermione snorted and nodded.

“Okay, Ron’s Chewie. I still want to figure out a Darth Vader.” Hermione told him. They sank into silence. “Snape!” she said suddenly.

“Where?” Harry’s wand appeared as he leapt to his feet and looked around.

“No, I mean Snape could be Darth Vader.” She said happily.

“Ugh. He’s not my father.” He told her. Harry put his wand away and sat back down.

“No, he’s not, but think about it. They both de- never mind. I forgot you haven’t seen the last one. Just accept it for now.” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Alright. I’ll take your word for it, Leia.” Hermione shuddered.

“Eww, Snape’s my father.” She shuddered again. “Eww!” Harry smiled and poked her.

“You deserve it.” He told her. He grinned.

“I think you have scarred me for life.” She collapsed on the grass. “Snape as my father. I will never be able to look at him the same way again.” Harry’s eyes widened before he joined her on the grass.

“What have we started?” He asked. “Just the thought...” He shuddered. “It just won’t fit in my head.” He complained. “Snape and my mum! Gah!” Hermione shuddered again.

“Quick! We need to change the subject! Who’s Lando?” she asked. Harry thought hard.

“Um, Draco Malfoy.” He told her. Hermione paused, thought for a few minutes, and nodded.

“Sounds good. Who fits Mad-eye?” She asked. They both paused. After several minutes of thinking, they both gave up on Mad-Eye. They could not think of someone to fit him. “C-3PO?” Hermione asked.

“Percy.” They said at the same time. They both laughed at the image.

“Hello, kids!” Both teenagers looked up to find Hermione’s parents standing there.

“Hello, Dr. Granger.” He stood and shook both parents’ hands. “Thanks for everything, and letting Hermione come and visit. It means a lot.” Hermione’s mother gave Harry a short hug and smoothed his hair.

“You’re welcome, dear.” She told him. “Friends are important.” She smiled and handed him off to her husband. Dr. Granger pulled him away from the girls and behind a tree.

“I’m going to make this quick, because if my wife finds out, I’ll be ordering pizza out for a month. I have Star Wars costumes, and if you ever want to borrow one, just write me at home, okay?”

“That sounds great, Dr. Granger. Thanks!” Hermione’s father smiled.

“My science fiction genes went into Hermione. Her mother may never forgive me, but I’ll nurture such appreciation when I can.” Dr. Granger messed up the hair Hermione’s mother had fixed and led Harry back to the girls.

“And what were you two doing?” Hermione asked.

“Fatherly threats, Princess.” Hermione turned red and squeaked.

“Yeah, Leia.” Harry told her. She glared at him. “Uh-oh. Hermione Death Glare.” Harry hid behind his hands. He found himself being

hugged in the next instant. He returned it and knew that Hermione's parents were going to wait by the car. "This is the last time you're going to visit before you go back to school." He said. She nodded.

"Yes, but I'm going to write everyday with the Mini-Messenger. I'll expect you to do the same." She said, stepping back. "And study!" Harry nodded.

"Alright. I promise." Hermione hugged him again and stepped away.

"May the Force be with you." She told Harry.

"And with you." Hermione left and Harry watched until her car turned the corner. He took out his Mini-Messenger and said his password. She was already writing a message. The Force will be with us, always. Harry pulled out his pen and wrote a return message. A Jedi's strength flows from the Force. He closed the book and gathered the others. Knowing Hermione, she had already read them. He needed to catch up.

Author's Note: I know. It's short. There'll be more next chapter cough Hogwarts! cough. Just thought you'd like to know. Thanks again for all of the great reviews and support. You all rock my little fanfiction world. Hugs to all!

Author's Note: You guys are wonderful! I love you all, and some of your ideas brought a smile to my face. Thanks so much for letting me know how I'm doing. Now that Sylvia is writing again, she is a much easier person to get along with. She actually read over this! Here's the next chapter!

"Run outside." Sensei said. Harry nodded and pulled on his shoes with Rick. It was a Saturday training session and he was already tired, but he was still having a blast.

"Let's go, Evan. Let's see if we can add another lap." Harry followed Rick outside and fell into a steady rhythm of running. "How are your arms feeling? You were a little stiff today." Harry blinked. He had been fighting to hide it.

"They're a little sore, not too bad." Rick gave Harry a look that would have made Sensei proud.

"We don't want you in pain." Rick told him. "I have something for that when we return to the gym."

"Okay." There was absolutely no use arguing with Rick or Sensei.

"Pain, Evan, is okay, because it tells you that something is wrong. Bruises teach you something we cannot. Pain that keeps you from moving is not okay. Tell us in the future." Harry dodged a rock in the road and looked at Rick.

"When did you turn into Sensei?" He asked. Rick blinked and then smiled.

"Sorry. He comes through in me when one of the students is hurt or injured. You can say that he taught me well." Harry smiled.

"That's for sure. I was almost ready to call you Sensei for a minute." Rick chuckled.

“I think that that is what the old man is aiming for.” Harry smiled at the nickname the students gave to Sensei. No one ever called him that to his face, but it was a term of endearment for the man who could wipe the floor with his son and still take on the rest of the class without breaking a sweat. At least, Harry thought so. “Oh, by the way, you should duck.” Harry had no time to ask why. A golf ball came from nowhere and narrowly missed Harry’s head. He ducked as another one almost hit him in his face. “Sensei’s in these trees somewhere.” Rick said from a branch. Harry wondered when he had managed to climb the tree. “I suggest you start catching some balls to return fire.” Nice suggestion. Well, I’m not a Seeker for nothing. This shouldn’t be too hard.

Harry caught the next ball and watched where the balls were coming from. He ducked another one and managed to catch it. He decided that he would not get any peace until he hit Sensei back. He dodged and caught three more balls until he figured out exactly where Sensei was hiding. He took one of his golf balls and threw it. Nothing. He ducked; this, well, EXERCISE, was becoming annoying. Quickly. He tossed another one. Nothing. He took a deep breath and let it out. He ducked and threw another ball. “Good!” Sensei popped up from the bushes and came forward. “Very good.” Rick came down from the tree and nodded to Sensei. “Gather the balls and return.” Sensei turned and walked away. Harry stared after him until Rick tapped him on the shoulder.

“What in the world was that all about?” He demanded of Rick as they started picking up the golf balls. Rick stood and looked at him.

“You haven’t figured it out?” He asked, clearly confused.

“No. Figure what out?” Harry snapped, nearly falling over one of the stupid golf balls that he now decided he hated. The stupid little white balls were intent on giving Harry a broken neck.

“Sensei’s training you for something, though I don’t know what it is. If I say anything more than that, he’ll kill me.” Rick said with a grin to let Harry know that he was joking. Rick shrugged and picked up another ball. “That looks like all of them. Let’s get back.” Harry

nodded and followed Rick back to the gym. What would Sensei be training for? More importantly, how would it be any help against fully trained wizards? They both dumped the golf balls into a waiting bucket and Rick pushed Harry towards the locker room.

“Showers.” Sensei said from his place on the floor. Harry nodded and went to the locker room. He grabbed his towel and toiletries and headed to his favorite shower. He stayed in for a while, allowing the hot water to wash away some of his tension and confusion. He sighed as he stepped out and shut off the water. He cursed himself for not thinking to bring clothes with him and went back to his locker. He had just pulled on his pants when Rick appeared. He was still in his gi and was carrying a small flat tin.

“Take a seat.” He told Harry. “I brought the stuff for your arms.” Harry eyed him. Oh come off it, Potter! This is Rick, not some Death Eater! Sit down! Harry sat down after he told himself off. Rick stepped behind him and Harry heard him open the tin. Rick rubbed his hands together and placed them both on Harry’s right shoulder.

Nothing happened at first. Then, something burned. “Ow!” Harry tried to pull away, but Rick’s hands kept him seated. “Ow! Rick, this really-” The sensation changed. “Ah!” Harry felt his previously sore shoulder soak up the heat and the pain in that particular muscle faded away.

“I should have warned you that it burns at first. Sorry.” Harry could only nod as Rick moved down his arm. This was amazing! It would be bliss after a Quidditch game, if there was still Quidditch, and the DA. Rick finished with his right arm and started on the left shoulder. Harry kept quiet while Rick did the same thing to the other side. “Whenever Dad worked me too hard, he would use this on me. I turned into putty in his hands.” Rick laughed when Harry barely managed to make a sound that sounded like “mm-hmm.” “Kind of like I’m doing to you, I guess.” Rick finished Harry’s left arm and moved to his neck. “This always feels good.” Harry found himself agreeing, but not quite capable of speech. “Anywhere else hurt?” Harry shook his head no. “Good. I’ll get you some of your own, but for now, you can use mine when you need it.”

“Mmm. Thanks.” Harry managed. “I feel better.”

“That was the intent. You have an appointment to get to. Go on.” Harry thanked Rick again, pulled on his shirt and rushed out of the locker room. Rick shook his head and went out to the floor. He sat down next to his father.

“You have a question?” Sensei asked, not opening his eyes.

“What are you training him for?” Sensei smiled and opened his eyes.

“Very good. Very quick.” Sensei stood and pulled his gym bag out from under the bench. He opened it and took out something wrapped in black cloth. Rick saw two different things. “Whichever he is better at.” Rick looked at the objects sitting on the bench and realized that Evan had to be in considerable danger for his father to actually do this. “We shall see.”

Harry walked down to the hallway towards Paul’s office. Joe was here again today. That much he did know. “Hi, Evan!” Harry turned to see Bug putting up a sign on the bulletin board.

“Hey, Bug. What’s that?” Bug jammed another staple into the paper and smiled.

“They’re having a September First picnic. Kind of like a party or something or other. There are going to be games,” another staple, “prizes,” another staple, “and lots of food.” Bug put the last staple in and turned to face Harry. “I’m told it’s going to be a lot of fun. Everyone gets to come.”

“That’s cool.” Harry said. Bug looked at him.

“You okay?” He asked. Harry nodded. He was tired, but fine.

“Yeah, didn’t sleep too well last night. Must have been the meatloaf.” He joked with Bug. The school had served meatloaf a few

nights before and no one had liked it. It had now become a floor joke as a way to dismiss little troubles. Bug snorted and closed the stapler.

“Okay. Just be sure to tell Paul if you can’t sleep.” Harry smiled and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, mother.” He said in a simpering tone. Bug gave him a playful push before shaking his head.

“Go on! We both know who the crazy one is on our floor.” Bug told him. Harry put his hands over his heart and pretended to faint.

“You’ve finally admitted it!” He crowed. “You know, Bug, the first step to curing something is admitting that you have a problem.” Harry told him seriously. Bug blinked before messing up Harry’s hair. “No, not the hair!” Harry wailed.

“You and your acting.” Bug said. “Uh-oh.” He said suddenly. Harry froze.

“What?” He demanded, ready to pull his wand out.

“There’s something I never thought I’d see.” Bug said quietly.

“What?” Harry demanded, nearly frantic with his worry, but too scared to turn around. You’re a Gryffindor. Suck it up! Harry turned to see Paul coming towards him. He was obviously upset about something. He let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Hi, Paul.” He said.

“Hey, kiddo.” Paul said, ruffling Harry’s already messed up hair. “You ready?” Harry nodded and said goodbye to Bug. Harry looked at Paul for a few seconds before venturing to figure out what was wrong.

“You okay?” He asked Paul. Paul glanced at Harry before he nodded. “What’s wrong?” Harry asked.

“I’m just a little frustrated, buddy. Nothing for you to worry about.” Harry frowned.

“Is it about me?” Harry asked. Paul shook his head. “Joe?” Paul stopped and looked at Harry.

“I told you it was nothing for you to worry about. Why are you asking?” Paul asked softly. Harry looked down at his feet.

“Sorry.” He told Paul. Paul led Harry to his office and motioned for Harry to take a seat.

“You want to tell me why you asked?” Paul asked, turning on the tape recorder.

“I just do better with more information. Dumbledore always used to tell me that ‘It’s nothing for you to worry about, dear boy’ pat me on the head, and send me on my way with a piece of candy.” Harry said. “I hated it.” Paul nodded and leaned back in his chair.

“I understand why now.” Paul said. “It is about Joe. He’s going to be a few minutes late. He has a flat tire.” Harry nodded. “I didn’t want you to worry, because I know you’re prone to it.” Harry smiled.

“That’s okay. If you want me to butt out, just say so.” Paul nodded.

“No problem. I’ll make sure to do so, and if something does involve you directly, I’ll tell you. So, since we have some time, what’s going on?” Harry opened his mouth to answer when a hiss from the corner interrupted him.

“No hello, you never write, you never call. You must not love me anymore!” Zen gave a good imitation of crying and curled around himself. Paul looked at Harry’s surprised face with an amused smile.

“Excuse me, Paul.” Harry said. He went over to the tank. “I thought you were sleeping.” Harry told the snake. Zen looked up at him and flicked out his tongue once.

“A likely story. I will forgive you for your oversight if you let me rest on you a while.” Harry turned to Paul.

“May I take him out for a while?” He asked. Paul nodded and then gave an evil grin.

“Joe hates snakes.” Harry smiled with Paul and opened the cage. He put his arm down where Zen could reach it. Zen curled around his arm and Harry went back to the couch. Zen settled against Harry’s chest. “So, what did Zen have to say?” Paul asked.

“Oh, he just said that I didn’t say hello, never write, never call and I didn’t love him anymore.” Paul blinked. “He said he would forgive me if I allowed him to rest on me for a while.” Harry ran a hand down Zen, which caused the snake to hiss with pleasure.

“Oh. I see. So, what’s going on?” Paul asked. Harry shrugged, still petting Zen.

“Nothing much. Bug told me about the September first picnic.” Harry said. “It sounds like a lot of fun.” Paul nodded.

“That’s the day you were supposed to go back to Hogwarts. How are you handling your decision?” Paul asked. Harry shrugged and looked out the window for a while before answering.

“I’m a little nervous.” He answered truthfully. “I just have this feeling that Dumbledore is going to show up with the entire Order and make me go back to school.” He ran another finger down Zen and sighed. “I don’t want to.” Paul looked at Harry and nodded.

“He can’t make you.” Paul said. Harry gave him a cynical smile and shook his head.

“You haven’t met Albus Dumbledore.” He warned Paul. “The Ministry of Magic is probably granting everyone in the Order free

reign so that fighting Voldemort will be easier.” He told Paul, still petting Zen.

“You’ve mentioned the Order a couple of times now. What is that, and how are you involved?” Paul asked. Harry smiled a bit and shifted Zen to a better position. He ran a hand through his hair and tried to figure out exactly how to tell Paul what the Order was.

“The Order of the Phoenix is an organization committed to fighting against Voldemort. Dumbledore heads it and uses it to protect me from Voldemort. Their track record isn’t too great, but then again, I’m not told a lot, so I don’t know how many times Voldemort has tried to attack me and I just didn’t know.” Harry said. “The security gets lax when I’m at school. Voldemort has managed to get there several times while I was there. It’s easy to sneak out of too.” Harry told him.

“So, who’s in this Order?” Paul asked. Harry shook his head.

“I wouldn’t know. I can guess, but then again, I have no idea.” Harry told him. Paul frowned. He knew that Harry knew more than he was letting on.

“I’m not going to use the information you tell me, Harry.” Paul said.

“I don’t know who else is listening. I can’t risk it, Paul.” Harry told him. “It’s safer this way.” Paul nodded his understanding. He’d allow Harry to do the spy thing if he must.

“You are aptly named, 007.” Paul said with a small smile. “What kind of people are in the Order?” Paul asked. “Just wizards?” He asked.

“Mostly. Some others as well.” Harry answered. “I don’t know why Dumbledore let some of them in, but he did.” Harry said, still petting Zen. “You aren’t unhappy with me for not telling you who, are you?” He asked suddenly.

“If you won’t feel safe after telling me, then I don’t want you to tell me. Remember, I told you that you could tell me whatever you

wanted. Knowing who is in the Order won't matter much to me." Harry smiled and relaxed again. "Do you feel safe when you are around the Order?" Paul asked.

"Well, I don't really know who is in the Order, just that they help to protect me." Harry snorted. "Wonder where they were when my aunt brought me here." Harry said with a smile. "Lousy bodyguards at that time." Paul smiled and nodded.

"I'd say. Good thing it wasn't Voldemort." Paul told him. Harry laughed and nodded.

"You haven't seen my aunt when someone tracks mud into the house." He told Paul. "Even Dudley gets a little pale at that point. I get to clean it, of course, but I find it rather funny when she yells at him. She never yells at him." He said with a funny look. A knock on the door startled both of them.

"Come in!" Joe opened the door, smiled at the both of them, and started to come in. He froze when he saw Zen and backed out of the doorway.

"I'll just wait out here until you put him away." He told Harry as he closed the door. Harry snickered and got up from the couch, causing Zen to give an angry hiss. Harry lifted the snake to face him.

"Sorry about that. Joe doesn't like snakes too much and he's uncomfortable around you. I'm going to put you on your warm rock." Zen had frozen and was staring at Harry. "What?" Harry asked.

"You are the lightening child." Zen said with awe in his voice. Harry raised an eyebrow.

"We'll talk about this later." He told Zen, closing the cage. "It's okay, Joe!" Joe opened the door cautiously and looked around. He relaxed when he saw Zen in his cage. "So, you don't like snakes?" Harry asked, returning to the couch.

“No. Not at all.” He said with an exaggerated shudder. “Creepy crawly little things with poison in their teeth.” Joe said, eyeing the tank.

“Good thing you don’t speak snake.” Harry said with a mischievous little smile. “I think that Zen would have been very insulted just now.” Harry sat back in the couch and felt his wand against his leg. He decided not to do it again, because Joe noticed the last time and he hadn’t even told Paul about his wand yet. Joe took his usual seat and looked at the pair.

“You guys like scaring me, don’t you?” Joe asked. Harry shook his head.

“Course not. We didn’t know what time you were coming exactly. If I had known, I would have put Zen away.” Harry was distracted by Zen at that moment.

“I’m so bored! Please take me out again! I promise that I won’t bite...much!” Harry smiled and turned back to Joe. He was staring at Zen with a slightly frightened expression.

“I wonder what that’s all about.” He said, turning back to Harry.

“Oh, he’s probably bored.” Harry said. Paul snorted and turned to dig in his mini-fridge for some caffeine. Joe looked like he needed it. Harry was in a very playful mood today.

“Please, my lightening child! Please take me out!” Harry glared at the snake and turned back to Joe. “Or, if you cannot take me out, will you give me a mouse?” Harry shook his head at the snake and pulled out his book of lines.

“Can we go over this passage here? Some of this language just doesn’t make sense, and Professor Bevington said that we need to know what we mean, just not what we’re saying.” Harry distracted Joe while Paul managed to hand out caffeinated beverages. Good thing Harry had play practice after lunch. He could let out all that energy on Professor Bevington. Paul watched as the two of them became lost in Edmund’s lines while Zen continued to be a noisy

participant. Harry glared a few times, but didn't speak back to the snake, for which Paul was grateful. He had no idea how to explain to Joe that Harry could speak snake.

September 1st

Hermione walked between her parents to Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. She could see various Order members placed around the train station. Some fit and others, like the one wearing a violent purple coat, did not. She hugged her father and thanked him for pushing her trunk to the gate. Her mother gathered her close and whispered in her ear. "We'll pass along your and Harry's mail, sweetie." Her mother released her with a sad smile.

"Thanks, Mum. I'll be careful, I promise." Hermione took the cart and walked through the barrier. She allowed the waiting Aurors to scan her, though Crookshanks tried to scratch them when they picked up his basket. She patted him absently on the head and pushed her trunk towards the train. Once her trunk was loaded, she took Crookshanks and climbed onto the train. She found an empty compartment and sat down near the window. She rummaged in her bag and let out a little noise of triumph when she found her new favorite book. She opened it, said her password, and wrote.

-Skywalker, you there?

-Yes, I'm here. Where are you?

-In an empty compartment on the train. I suspect that it will fill up sooner or later. What are you doing?

-Soaking up some sun under my favorite tree. Nursing a few bruises. Nothing much.

-That's good. Don't you have class?

-School picnic. We're all outside. They're having a three-legged race in a minute. Bug and I are partners.

-Oh, I'm jealous. How's your meditation coming?

-Better and better. I may actually be getting close to Occlusion sometime soon.

-Great! And Sensei?

-He creates a new torture known as an exercise everyday.

-I was thinking about a name for him in code.

-Oh?

-Yoda.

-Perfect! He even talks backwards sometimes. He said "Up here my face is!" the other day.

-Wow. You don't sound like you're bored. That's good. Have rehearsals started yet?

-Tomorrow. We were just reading lines up until now. We'll start stage directions and stuff like that tomorrow. Sensei and I have been working on the choreography for the fight scene in the last act. The kid who plays Edgar will start with us next week. We kind of look like brothers. We both have black hair.

-Great! I talked to my parents and they're going to spring me from Hogwarts due to a "family emergency". Three front row tickets, please. Have you asked your relatives if they want to come?

-No. Why would they?

-You never know Harry. They might. You did say that your aunt sent you that letter and she apologized for a few things, right? Maybe she's trying to start over with you.

-I don't think I want to start over with any of them.

-Just think about it, Skywalker.

-I'll think about it.

-Good. Oh, Ginny just came in. I'll write you later, okay?

-Sure. Talk to you then.

Hermione looked up from her book and smiled. "Hi, Ginny!" Hermione stopped when she saw the silver prefect's badge on the girl's robes. "Oh, Ginny! Congratulations!" She hugged Ginny, who thanked her and sat down.

"Gred and Forge are devastated, of course. They cried all over me. It was hilarious. Ron's excited about it, because he's got his Protector thing going on and he thinks that I 'will keep the younger kids in line and away from the ever-present danger'." Hermione blinked and looked at Ginny.

"Oh, dear. Has he been like that the entire time he visited home this last week?" Ginny grimaced and hid her face.

"Worse. I hope that Harry has tons of patience, because Ron wouldn't shut up about Harry's safety this year and how he would have to make sure that Harry didn't do anything dangerous." Hermione smirked and shook her head.

"Well, I think that Ron will get a run for his boasting, knowing Harry." Hermione told her. She put her Mini-Messenger away and turned to face Ginny fully. "So, tell me all about your summer. I've been wondering how you kept busy." Hermione said, petting Crookshanks, who had decided that Hermione's lap was the best place for him.

"I worked in Fred and George's joke shop. I had a lot of practice ducking, that's for sure. They were rather good-natured and took me out for ice cream a lot." Ginny smiled. "They forgot that ice cream makes me rather hyper, so I repaid every prank in full." Hermione laughed, knowing that Ginny's temper was inherited from her mother. Both girls jumped when the door slid back. Ron stood there with a rather serious expression on his face.

“Hello, Hermione.” He came in and two others followed behind him. Hermione smiled and said hello to Neville before seeing the other person. She eyed him and felt her wand, ready to pull it at a moment’s notice.

Draco Malfoy stood there and seemed different. She wasn’t sure how. He had a scar running down the right side of his face, from what Hermione had yet to figure out. He looked...tired? She couldn’t place it. He stepped forward and extended his hand. Ginny watched from behind him with wide eyes, as though she couldn’t quite believe what she was seeing. Hermione stood to meet him and took his hand. She blinked in surprise when he turned it and bowed over it, lips almost grazing her knuckles. “A pleasure to see you again, Miss Granger.” He said quietly. Hermione took a deep breath and let it out.

“Call me Hermione if you let me call you Draco.” He nodded and corrected her with his preferred nickname of “Drake” before turning to greet Ginny in the same fashion. Hermione noticed Ron and Neville watching warily as the scene played out. Ginny looked slightly frightened but smiled at Draco when he stood up again. She scooted aside so that he could sit down. Hermione wanted to pull out her Mini-Messenger and tell Harry what had just happened, but she decided to wait until she was alone. He would react the same way no matter when she told him.

“You better not have any ideas about my sister, mate.” Ron growled. Draco looked at Ron from his seat next to Ginny.

“Not without your permission, of course.” He said, giving off a very charming smile. Well, this was a new development! She couldn’t wait to relate all the gory details to Harry. She was sure he would be rolling around with laughter. The teenagers all started speaking about their summers. Neville cornered Hermione on Herbology and almost forty-five minutes passed before the door opened again.

“Here you all are!” Luna said. “I thought that I would find you here.” She came in and sat down. She looked around dreamily and then seemed to snap out of it for a second. “Where’s Harry?” She asked. Everyone in the compartment stopped and looked around. Ron let out

a couple of colorful words Hermione was sure he learned from the Aurors with whom he had trained over the summer.

“Neville, you’re with me and Luna. Drake, stay here in case Harry comes. He’ll most likely try to attack you. Freeze him if you have to.” Draco nodded and settled back against the seat. He looked tired. Hermione figured that Ron was giving Draco time to rest before getting to the school. Hermione checked her watch before standing.

“Prefects’ meeting, Ginny.” She said, standing up and dusting off her robes. Draco shook his head.

“All prefects’ meetings have been changed to this evening at Hogwarts, in the Great Hall, with the Protectors.” He told her. “Professor Dumbledore needs to say something, and he doesn’t want to repeat himself.” He told her. Hermione looked him over before nodding and sitting down again. He wouldn’t lie about something like that.

“Anyone want to play Exploding Snap?” Ginny asked, obviously trying to keep her mind off something.

“You’re worried about Harry, aren’t you?” Hermione asked. Ginny shrugged. “I bet that his relatives just decided that they wouldn’t bring him. You know how they are about magic.” Hermione told her. “The headmaster will probably send someone to pick Harry up.” She gave Ginny a hug and started dealing. “You want to play, Drake?” Hermione asked. He gave her a glance before sitting up and nodding. She dealt him in and they started playing. Ron came back almost an hour later, still swearing. Most of the people accompanying him wore the same badges he wore. Hermione figured that they were in the Protectors thing too.

“We can’t do anything more until we get to Hogwarts. Just keep on your rounds. If he’s here, we’ll find him.” Everyone nodded and moved away. Ron came in and watched the game for a minute. “Hopefully, he hasn’t been taken by the Dark Lord.” Ron said. Hermione rolled her eyes and played a card. She noticed that Draco

had grown pale at the name, but said nothing. "Who knows what is being done to him?" He said to himself.

"Oh, Ron! You're not sure that he was kidnapped so please stop saying that. He probably missed the train!" Ginny snapped, losing her temper with her brother.

"Ginny, we were warned that something like this could happen!" Ron countered. Hermione slammed her cards down and pulled her wand.

"So help me, Ron, I will hex you if you don't shut up. You have no evidence, so let's not go looking for trouble. I'm sure that Harry is fine." Ron's brain actually worked at the threat, for he stopped talking. Hermione turned back to her game with Draco and Ginny, content to ignore Ron giving out orders to every Protector who walked through the door.

The Great Hall looked the same as it did every year for the starting feast. Hermione greeted people she hadn't seen on the train and sat down at Gryffindor. A new table had somehow been added (most likely by magic) and everyone who wore gold badges sat there. Hermione relished the silence she found in Ron's absence. She watched the Protectors swarm the Head Table. Dumbledore had yet to appear, so they were talking to every teacher they could. Snape's glare kept a large circumference of free space around him. The only student to approach him was Draco. Hermione watched the exchange with interest. She saw different body language than was normal for the pair. Had something happened between the two of them? Snape nodded and waved Draco away. He sat down at the Protectors table and ignored the Slytherins. Hermione could hear some of the things they hissed at him. She frowned and made a mental note to always have her wand.

Professor Dumbledore came in at the same time as the first years. He nodded to the teachers and motioned that they would speak to them later. Hermione smiled to herself. Professor McGonagall brought out the Sorting Hat and the stool. The hat jerked to life and

looked around the hall. The rip on the brim opened and he began his song for the year.

Another year had come and gone

And still no one has learned

That Hogwarts school must be one

To find the peace that is earned

One of our number has gone away

Hidden as an ordinary Muggle

Healing and training, waiting for the day

When he will be forced to end our struggle

Marked by evil and wanted by none

His life was changed by an aunt's care

He is protected and will be a new son

Enabling her to give him his share

Now he is missing and missed by all

He has left behind the magic he knew

To embrace his old world this fall

Before he will return to us anew

Listen to me closely, youngest of Hogwarts Four

For a lesson I have for you all

Pride, bigotry, prejudice, discrimination

Will harm you if you listen to the Dark Lord's call

Another year has come and gone

And still no one has learned

That Hogwarts school must be one

To find the peace that is earned

Hermione grew pale. The Hat knew! She only hoped that he didn't know about her. Harry needed her help. She couldn't be found out. How could it have known? More importantly, did it know where Harry was? She itched to get out her Mini-Messenger and ask what Harry thought, but didn't want to draw attention to herself. She clapped when student was sorted to Gryffindor, but her real attention was on Professor Dumbledore. He looked thoughtful. She watched as he gave a quick scan of the Hall and grew agitated. Snape spoke to him and Dumbledore calmed down just the slightest bit. He was still troubled, but seemed not to show it. Dumbledore stood after the Sorting was finished.

"Welcome to another year at Hogwarts, old and new alike." He paused. "Due to recent events, Hogsmeade weekends have been cancelled until further notice. No one is allowed outside the castle without a teacher present. The Forbidden Forest is expressly forbidden. Our caretaker, Mr. Filch, has asked me to remind you that no magic is permitted in the hallways. Almost all of Weasley Wizarding Wheezes are listed as forbidden items. Mr. Filch will be happy to provide a list to any student who requests one." Hermione grinned. She thought that Fred and George's business was doing well. She made a mental note to tell Harry. "I do not think that I need to remind you that Voldemort is indeed back." Several girls screamed and many shuddered at his name. Hermione rolled her eyes. "In light of his return, an old club of students has been returned to Hogwarts. Please stand, Protectors." Hermione watched as the entire table stood. "This club will act like their house. They have their own dormitory if they should wish to use it, but they are still members of their original houses and should be treated as such. These students

have been trained to defend Hogwarts and her students should trouble find us here. They can easily be identified by the badges they wear. They have as much authority as a teacher in emergency situations. Please remember that.” He motioned to one of the teachers. The new DADA teacher, obviously. The man stood. “This is Professor William Zareh. He will be professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Please make him feel welcome.” The students clapped half-heartedly, many obviously wondering how long this teacher was going to last.

Hermione turned back to the table as Dumbledore sat down again. He had not said a word about Harry. Hermione did not know if this was a good thing or a bad thing. She frowned. She would have to find out at the meeting later that night.

The professors of Hogwarts all gathered in the teacher’s lounge on the first floor. Snape settled into his favorite chair. It was the one farthest away from everyone else with his back firmly settled against the wall. He watched the others mill around, all babbling about the absence of Potter. Snape wanted to tell them that it was good riddance to an unnecessary nuisance, but held his tongue. No need to make anyone think that he had something to do with the boy’s appearance. The new professor sat next to Snape and observed the crowd. Snape liked him for the sole reason that he was very taciturn. All conversations he had held with the man (he could count them on one hand) had been straightforward, to the point, and thank Merlin, short. Snape considered those the best kinds of conversations, indeed, the only ones worthy of his time, unless the conversations were with Draco. Those were different. Dumbledore came into the room and motioned everyone to their seats. “Settle down, everyone.” He said, sinking into his own chair. “Now, does anyone have any information on the whereabouts of Harry Potter?” He asked. Most of the teachers looked shocked.

“ You haven’t hidden him away somewhere?” Flitwick asked. Dumbledore sighed and shook his head.

“No, Filius. I haven’t. I left him with his aunt and uncle. The blood protections were really strong this year. I couldn’t bring myself to

remove him when he was so well protected.” Dumbledore admitted. He looked around the room. “Someone will need to go to his aunt’s home and bring him to school, then. I’ve heard of some trouble with them in the past concerning Harry and Hogwarts.” Snape decided to look very angry about something. Hmm, Longbottom reaching an Outstanding and being in his NEWTS level class would work nicely. “It will have to be someone he knows.” McGonagall stood. “No, Minerva. I need you here.” He said. “The prefects and Protectors are gathering in the Great Hall. Please see to them.” McGonagall muttered under her breath about the stupidity of certain Muggles and left. “Severus.” Snape looked up and scowled.

“I believe that we all know of Mr. Potter’s opinion of me, Headmaster. I am the worst candidate for this...mission.” Snape told the headmaster. He tried to keep his face sneer clear, but barely managed it.

“He knows you, Severus. You are the best trained.” Snape glared. How could the headmaster ask this of him? He knew what Potter thought of him. The feelings were indeed mutual.

“Headmaster, normally I would not deny you, but anyone else in this room would be better suited than I. Why not Hagrid?” He asked. The giant looked very proud of himself. Let him be.

“I am looking for stealth. You need to get in, take Harry, and get out in the shortest amount of time. Hagrid will stick out a little too much, no offense meant, Hagrid. Severus, you and Harry have had several events in your pasts that was just between the two of you, so you can use that as your means of convincing him of your identity.” Snape sneered. Oh, yes, he and Potter had several “events”. “Take William with you as back-up.” Snape spared the man sitting next to him a glance. Dumbledore seemed adamant on making the same mistakes again.

“If he so much as raises his voice to me, Headmaster, I will not be responsible for my actions.” Snape warned him. Dumbledore nodded his understanding.

“Use any means necessary to bring him here, Severus. Just don’t hurt him.” Snape looked hurt.

“You said any means.” He reminded Dumbledore. The other teachers all started yelling at Snape. Dumbledore laughed.

“Severus, you must make jokes more often. You have an entertaining sense of humor.” He said, standing. Snape looked up. If the headmaster thought he had been joking, that was alright with him. He hadn’t been joking. “Go now. Bring Harry back soon.” Dumbledore stood and the meeting ended. After the Protectors meeting, he went to his office to wait and watch for when Severus would return.

Almost a halfhour had passed until he heard the revolving stairs start up. He called for Severus to come in when the younger man knocked. He arranged his face into a pleasant and hopeful expression for Harry. The sight that met his eyes was not the one he was expecting. Both wizards came into the office and sank into chairs without waiting for the offer. Dumbledore did not see Harry. “Severus, where is Harry?” He looked over the two men. Both seemed exhausted for some reason. Severus was sporting a black eye, while William looked frazzled. “William, Severus? What has happened?”

“He’s not there, Headmaster.” Snape announced after taking several deep breaths. “He’s not there.” Dumbledore’s expression faded.

“What do you mean, he’s not there?” Dumbledore demanded. William backed away from the rage in Dumbledore’s voice.

“Just what I said, Headmaster. He’s not there. Getting through the wards was a nightmare. Once we managed to reach the door, that aunt of his refused to let us in. We had to fight our way in. Potter is not in the house. Whatever you do, watch out for her left hook. Lily must have taught her that.” Severus reached up a tentative hand and winced when he hit the bruise. He looked up at the headmaster and noticed the stormy expression. He would rather face Voldemort on a bad day.

“What do you mean, he’s not there?” The old wizard demanded again.

Author’s Note: Okay, that was really long! Hope you all enjoy. Please let me know what you think. Thanks to everyone who has reviewed so far. They’ve been a big help! The rest of the Hogwarts incident will continue in the next chapter. This chapter was just too long!

Author's Note: Wow, what a response! You guys are great! First, some answers to your questions. I received quite a few of them and most were so close to the answers that it surprised me.

Objects Sensei showed Rick/Sensei himself: Not telling yet. /Sensei is based on my own teacher, who is uncanny in many ways. The man can look at you and know if you've eaten your vegetables that day. I am not kidding. Uncanny, I tell you.

Hedwig: She's staying in Harry's room with Aunt Petunia. She's not had much to do, so she hasn't been mentioned. She'll make it back into the story sooner or later.

Wards: You guys are all over this one. Some of you have guessed correctly. All will be revealed in time.

Protectors: Those who were in the DA. As for why Hermione is not in the Protectors, it has something to do with her parents...

Remus: He'll be showing up eventually.

Draco: He's not easily manipulated. Most of your ideas are correct.

Sorting Hat: The Hat is a magical object. Key word: magical. That should give you enough of a hint.

Order's Protection: I mentioned in Chapter 16 that the Order members had been pulled from Harry's house and sent to Hogsmeade. I guess that was too subtle a hint as to why there were no bodyguards at Harry's house when he was removed and taken to St. Jude's. Dumbledore wrote to Petunia and said "due to recent circumstances". The event that caused Dumbledore to change his plans was an attack on Hogsmeade. Every Order member was recalled and sent to Hogsmeade, even Harry's bodyguards. Dumbledore was counting on the strong wards.

Now to the story!

Hermione and Ginny sat side by side in the Great Hall. Most of the prefects were milling around, talking to each other and catching up on what they had done over the summer. The Protectors were

discussing something. Hermione noticed that many seemed anxious about something...or someone. She guessed that they were worried about the fact that Harry was not there. "What do you think this meeting is about?" Ginny asked Hermione in a low tone. Hermione pushed her hair away from her face and frowned.

"Most likely rules for the new school year, emergency procedures, and so on." Hermione told her. "The professors will want us prepared for almost anything." Hermione rested her head on her hand and sighed. A voice next to her startled her.

"That's what we're here for." Ron told her with obvious pride. "We're to protect the school. Prefects keep order." Hermione looked at him and decided not to argue. Ron moved to the other side of Ginny and pulled her into a conversation about various fifth year students. Hermione found her Mini-Messenger and whispered her password. She decided that no one would think it strange that the resident know-it-all would already be engaged in studies.

You there, Skywalker? Guess not. Well, you certainly missed a lot. Everyone is absolutely frantic over you. It is quite amusing when one is in the know. Ginny worked for the twins all summer. Do you remember how pompous Percy was? Ron would make him proud. Neville is still quiet, but seems genuinely concerned that you're missing. Luna noticed that you were missing forty-five minutes after the train left the station. Sharp one there. I can hear your thoughts...what about Malfoy? He's...different. He has a scar running down the right side of his face. He seems worn out and tired, but still alert somehow. He goes pale at the mention of Voldemort, but doesn't give much of a reaction at all. I doubt Ron has noticed. Ron doesn't do subtle. Malfoy has a nickname, Drake, which he has requested I use. He has been very polite and even kissed my hand and called me Miss Granger. He and Snape seem awfully close. I'll let you know anything I find out about that. As for your list, I think Neville may be the best bet. He is always eager to share what he is learning. He has already told me one spell "Constricti Appendia". It is an advanced spell that actually binds to moving parts and continues

to contract until no movement is possible. The only danger is allowing it to wrap around an airway.

“Blimey, Hermione! Classes haven’t even started yet and you’re already studying!” Ron nearly shouted. Hermione slammed the book shut and put on her best glare, version 22, “how dare you interrupt me?”

“And people wonder at my grades.” She said tightly. “Besides, this” she held up her Mini-Messenger, “is my planner. You do know what that is, right?” Ron blustered a moment before coming up with his response.

“Why are you so concerned about it now?” he demanded. Hermione put the book back in her bag and shook her head.

“Some people like organization, Ronald.” She was saved from another lame retort when McGonagall entered the Great Hall and announced that Dumbledore would be with them in just a few minutes.

“Any organization tips?” A soft voice asked beside her. She turned and saw Draco sitting there. She gave him a tentative smile, which he returned full force.

“That depends on your objective.” She told him. “Do you know what that is?” Draco nodded.

“I need to find more hours than there are in the day. I have school, training, and my estate to oversee.” He told her. Hermione’s eyebrows rose.

“An estate would complicate things.” She told him. She whipped out her parchment, ink, and quill. “Your school schedule is solid. I am guessing your training schedule is as well?” she started drawing a chart. Draco nodded and pulled out a piece of parchment. He unfolded it and handed it to Hermione. “How in the world did you get your timetable so early?” She demanded. She could hear Ron moaning that she was going to corrupt “Drake”. Hermione ignored the comment for Ron’s own good.

“Severus.” Draco said with a small smile. Hermione nodded and filled in his classes on the chart. “Training is six a.m. until breakfast every morning, and seven to nine at night, when we start patrol.” Hermione filled in those times on her chart. She paused and looked it over.

“Quidditch?” She asked, remembering that he was on the Slytherin team.

“No Quidditch this year. Too dangerous.” Hermione nodded. She pushed the paper in front of him.

“I’ve marked in your class times, training times, and the best time for you to study. Do you have staff at your estate?” She asked.

“Yes, why?” He said, studying the parchment.

“You’re going to have to delegate some of your responsibilities to one of your staff. No one can do everything that you want to do, even with magic behind them. If you delegate some of the lesser responsibilities to one of your staff, whatever they may be, you’ll free up some of your time for the really important things that require your time.” Draco nodded his understanding.

“I’ll have to take that into consideration. Thank you for the suggestions.” Hermione smiled and nodded.

“You’re welcome. Ron and Harry never seem to appreciate them.” She paused and frowned. “I hope he is alright.”

“We do not have any other reason to believe otherwise.” Draco slouched against the table. Hermione’s eyes grew wide. “What?” He asked.

“You’re slouching!” He shrugged and closed his eyes.

“I’m tired. I believe that it’s a normal reaction.” Hermione smiled. She was startled when every Protector jumped to their feet. Dumbledore had entered. The old wizard smiled and motioned everyone to their seats. Draco appeared alert now. Hermione wondered how much of it was real.

“Welcome back to another year at Hogwarts.” Dumbledore said happily. “You will find this year’s rulebook and guidelines in front of you, Prefects. Please study this and be familiar with the contents. There are several changes. You will find the outline in the first few pages.” Hermione looked it over. She frowned at some of the items. This was going to be a rough year. She was glad that Harry had decided not to come back. “Please remember that these new rules will help to keep the students safe.” Hermione waved her hand in the air. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

“Headmaster, I’ve noticed that students are not allowed on the grounds. How will we have Care of Magical Creatures?” She asked. “We need that class.” Dumbledore gave her an indulgent smile.

“The Care of Magical Creatures class will be moved to the inner courtyard.” He told her. “Do not worry, Miss Granger. Lesson quality will not suffer from these new rules. Also, I must announce that Quidditch has been cancelled this year due to Voldemort’s return.” Hermione nodded to herself and turned back to the rulebook. “I am requiring both a Protector and Prefect on a team for nightly patrols. No one should make a patrol by themselves.” He said. He paused and looked around the Hall. “I cannot stress this enough. These are dangerous times. No one can be too cautious.” He smiled at them all again, as though he was a grandfather dismissing his grandchildren for the evening. “Duty schedules will be handed out tomorrow with the class time tables.” Ginny raised her hand. “Yes, Miss Weasley?”

“Please, sir. I know that I speak for everyone here when I ask. Where is Harry? Is he okay?” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled a bit for the first time that night.

“Harry is fine. I’ve sent two professors to his home to bring him to school. He’ll be back with you soon.” Hermione smiled, knowing

everyone wore the same smile of relief. She only hoped that Petunia Dursley was going to be a match for the professors and the headmaster. She knew that Dumbledore would make a personal appearance if he felt it necessary. The meeting was dismissed shortly thereafter and she went to Gryffindor tower with Ginny. She couldn't wait to tell Harry everything.

Harry was lying on a blankets with his eyes closed. It was almost lunchtime and he could smell the hamburgers cooking. Everyone was outside and looked like they were having a good time. All of the teachers were trying their hands at a grill. Professor Bevington had an apron on with the message of "To grill, or not to grill", while Skye was trying to show any student willing to listen how to make dessert. Harry was interrupted in his thoughts by a voice. "Hey, buddy." Paul dropped onto the blanket next to Harry and handed him a soda. "How are you doing?" Harry sat up and looked around. No one was near them. He pulled his legs towards him and rested his chin on his knees.

"I'm..." he paused. What was he? Scared? Frightened? Nervous? "apprehensive." Yeah, that sounded about right. "I'm worried that Professor Dumbledore will be here soon and take me to Hogwarts." Harry rubbed his eyes behind his glasses and sighed. "I don't want to go. I want to stay here." Paul nodded his understanding, hoping that Harry wouldn't start pacing. Harry usually managed several rounds when he talked about Dumbledore for any length of time. "I feel like I should be doing something, you know?" Harry laughed a little. "Stand at the gates with my wand raised, ready to show him that I'm staying here. Not just...wait here for him." He finished. He hid his face on his knees again and took a deep breath. Paul broke out of his listening phase and realized what Harry had said.

"Wand?" Paul asked. Harry raised his head and stared at Paul. He smiled at Paul's face and obvious wonder.

"How did you think we did it?" Harry asked. "Snap our fingers? Do a little jig?" Paul smiled and shook his head. Harry looked around again and seemed satisfied that no one would disturb them. He pulled up his pants leg and Paul saw, well, a wand tied to his leg with what

looked to be a shoelace. Harry removed the lace and put the wand down on the blanket in front of him. "That's my life there. A wizard is useless without his wand. Defenseless."

"May I?" Paul asked. He didn't want to touch it without Harry's permission.

"Sure. You can't use it, anyway." Paul reached down and took the wand into his hand.

"You carry this with you all the time?" Paul asked, rolling it in his hand.

"All day, everyday." Harry answered. "It used to be my best friend. Now..." He shrugged.

"Now?" Harry had been about to reveal something. There was more to it and Harry needed to tell it.

"A necessary burden, I guess. I need it." Paul placed the wand back on the ground and looked at Harry.

"I've never seen you use it." Harry looked up from the wand and nodded.

"Yeah, I know. I'm not allowed to use it outside of school until I am seventeen. I'd be expelled if I did. Nearly was last summer, after some Dementors showed up at my house and tried to hurt me." Paul blinked and looked at Harry.

"Dementors?" Paul asked. What were they? "Are they something like vampires, werewolves, or unicorns?" Paul knew something of the magical world, right? He had read fairy tales as a kid, just like everyone else.

"I guess they would be like a vampire. They suck out happy feelings from you. Every good emotion, just gone, until you have nothing but the bad left. Even Muggles can feel them." Harry clenched his hands

around his legs and stared off into space. "When they're near me, I can hear Voldemort murdering my mum." Paul reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know a spell to get rid of them, but it needs happy memories, the more powerful the better."

"I see. It's a good thing you have the wand then. Can you live without your wand?" He asked, truly curious.

"Well, yeah, I can. In the Muggle world, at least. I was raised as one." Harry told him. "I would have a few problems in the magical world. That's where Voldemort can really find me. All he has to do is follow the crowds." He smirked. "The only time I am allowed to use it is when my life is danger. That's happened a few times."

"Well, with your looks, who can blame the girls for trying?" Paul's joke broke Harry out of his depression. Harry fell back on the blanket and laughed. "I'll handle your headmaster if he shows up. Legally, he cannot remove you. He has no say in your life or where you go to school." Paul said, pulling Harry back up to face him.

"The Ministry will most likely give Dumbledore permission to do whatever he wants, with Voldemort now officially back." Paul cut him off.

"Let's not borrow trouble until it comes to our door, alright?" Paul asked. "Promise me that you'll let the adults handle this." Paul studied Harry's face for a few minutes. "Look at me, Harry." Harry moved his eyes from the blanket to meet Paul's. "Please allow me to handle this." Paul said, taking Harry's hands in his own. "Please?" Harry dropped his eyes and nodded. "Thank you." Paul said, getting on his knees. "Thank you for the privilege. I will cherish it forever." Paul hugged Harry's shoulders and rested his body on him. "Oh, no. You've put a spell on me. I've increased in mass!"

"Paul! Gerroff!" Harry pulled himself out from under Paul. "Off, you crazy therapist!" Paul laughed as Harry shoved him away. "You're mental." Harry said as he brushed himself off.

“Takes one to know one.” Paul said cheerfully. He saw someone sneaking up behind Harry. “Have a good flight.” Harry’s smile faded.

“What are you-?” Sensei grabbed Harry around his waist and tossed him over a shoulder. “Sensei! Put me down!” Sensei proceeded to carry Harry over to the food. Harry looked back at Paul. “You! You knew he was sneaking up on me!” Harry accused, pointing at Paul with a look that promised a lot of hurt once Harry felt the ground beneath his feet again.

“Time to eat. Everyone must eat.” Sensei told Harry. Harry rolled his eyes and allowed Sensei to take him where he wanted. He didn’t want to argue with the man.

Harry had just sat down to finish his science homework when he got the oddest feeling. He wanted to say that it was that last hot dog he had eaten (what was in those things, anyway?), but couldn’t dismiss it as indigestion. Something was wrong. Not right. The only funny thing, well, besides having feelings of that kind in the first place (Professor Trelawney would die of happiness), was that the danger was not coming towards him. He pushed back from his desk and paced. What was it? It wasn’t malicious in the first place. Aunt Petunia. Something was after his aunt. Oh, I can hear Hermione now... “It’s your people saving thing again, Harry.” Harry left his room and slid into the hallway. Adult. Adult. He needed to find an adult. “Jack!” Harry ran up to the nurses’ station. “Jack, where’s Paul? I need Paul.”

“What’s wrong, 007?” Jack asked as he stood up from his seat. He came around the desk and knelt in front of Harry.

“I need Paul’s help. Only Paul. Where is he?” Harry danced in place. They were running out of time!

“In his office. Do you want me to call him?” Harry shook his head and took off for the stairs. “Evan!”

“No time!” Harry ran down the three flights of stairs and narrowly avoided a collision with the doors at the bottom. No wonder Rick said running was good for you. He knocked on Paul’s door and threw it

open when Paul answered. "I need to call home. My aunt, I think she's in trouble." He explained. Paul dropped his pen and stared.

"Harry, is this a Voldemort thing?" Paul asked cautiously.

"No, it's not! Can I call first and explain later?" Paul nodded and pushed the phone to Harry. Harry picked it up and dialed the phone number that his teacher had pounded into his head in primary school. "Come on, come on, come on!" He visibly relaxed when his aunt answered. "Aunt Petunia! There are wizards on the way. From Hogwarts. I don't know. I got a feeling. No. Remember, the wards will protect you if you really don't want them there. All it takes is force of will. Don't let them intimidate you." Paul was becoming slightly concerned. Harry was starting to sound hysterical. "Yes, he's here." Harry held out the phone to Paul. Paul took it.

"Hello?" Paul said into the receiver.

"Tell him that I'll call back after it's over; if there are wizards on the way. Calm him down, please." A doorbell sounded on her end. "Good-bye." Petunia disappeared. Harry stood next to the desk, obviously trying to get a hold of himself.

"Deep breaths. Deep breaths." Paul told him. Harry nodded. "Sit down. Your aunt said that she will call back after the wizards leave." Harry nodded again, giving Paul the feeling that Harry was not hearing anything he was saying. "Darth Vader's in the doorway, asking him to join you." Harry nodded again. Uh-huh. "Harry!" Harry jerked and blinked. He looked at Paul.

"What?" He asked.

"Your aunt will call back when it's over." Paul handed Harry a bottle of water. "Drink some of that." Harry nodded again and did as he was told. "I'm proud of you, Harry." Harry looked confused. "You did exactly as we discussed. Letting the adults take care of things." Harry smiled.

“I guess I did do that. It was automatic.” Harry explained, finally relaxing enough to talk.

“As it should be.” Paul told him. “As it should be.”

“What are our options, Severus?” Dumbledore asked. “Surely she will not be able to resist Veritaserum?” Severus pointed his wand at his eye and mumbled a word before answering Dumbledore. The bruise faded away and he sat up.

“Headmaster, you know that Muggles and potions do not really mix, especially such a strong one. It will either be ineffectual or kill her.” Snape explained.

“Legilimency?” Dumbledore asked. Snape stopped, considered it, and nodded.

“I had not attempted more than a cursory glance. William?” Professor Zareh shook his head.

“I’m not good enough at Legilimency to do that. I need them almost unconscious.” He explained. “Just enough to fit in under the Aurors’ requirements.” Dumbledore nodded and waved it away.

“Do not worry. I told you that only Occlumency was required. You are the stronger in that, and that is what is important.” Professor Zareh nodded. “Very well. Let’s get to Privet Drive and find Harry.” Snape fought back a groan and took hold of Fawkes’s tail as Dumbledore ordered. All three appeared on Privet Drive. Fawkes let out a cry and disappeared.

Dumbledore could feel the wards pressing in around him, holding him to the spot and smothering his magic. He started “talking” to the wards, trying to convince them that he was the primary caster, that he set them, and that he meant no harm to the boy or his family. They responded faster than they had for Snape. He gestured for the other two wizards to follow him and led the way up the short walk and to the door. Dumbledore thought that he heard Snape mutter “told you so”, but couldn’t be sure as he had rung the bell at the same time.

Harry's cousin opened the door. He studied the three wizards, shut the door and yelled for his mother. "Mum, wizards are here!" Petunia opened the door just a few seconds later.

"I thought I told you that he was not here." She demanded. "You!" She opened the door and allowed Dumbledore to enter. "I didn't think that you were going to listen to your little professor." Snape blinked and fingered his wand. Oh, which curse to use on this annoying Muggle? Something painful, definitely. "I suppose you can all sit down, since you are here disturbing us normal people." She pointed sharply to the living room. Dumbledore entered and took a seat as she ordered.

"Mrs. Dursley, I know what you told my professors, but I must insist that you talk to me as well. Harry is in danger away from your house. The only safe places for him are here and Hogwarts." Dumbledore explained patiently. "I am doing this for his own good."

"His own good?" She demanded. "His own good?" Her folded hands clenched in anger as she hissed Dumbledore's answer back to him. "Do you know what that boy was like when he came back from that place you call a school?" She demanded. "I do not know more than you told me, Professor, but that boy was hurting. None of you...wizards...did anything to help him." She told him.

"Potter's always enjoyed a bit more consideration than good for him, I assure you." Snape sneered from next to Dumbledore. Petunia rounded on him.

"Consideration? Consideration!" Professor Zareh discreetly moved away from Snape and closer to Dumbledore. This was his second time facing this woman, and she still scared him. "I had a fifteen year old boy sleeping during the day so that I could wake him from his nightmares. Those nightmares not only prevented him from sleeping normally, they also made him lose what little food he was able to stomach. He looked on the verge of nervous collapse, and you dare to tell me that he's had 'consideration'?" Snape stared her down, one eyebrow raised, as she ranted. He did get vague images of what Potter had been like his days at home, but nothing more than that. "I

know you.” Her statement broke him out of his concentration. “You’re Professor Snape.” She said, pointing a finger at him. “You’re Severus! Lily’s friend.” Snape’s face slid into its usual mask and he proceeded to intimidate her. “I remember you now.” Intimidation! Longbottom exploding a cauldron, which harmed other students, Slytherin students. “You certainly grew up.” She said.

“Yes, well, time does that to people. Now, where is Potter, so that we may get him back to the safety of his fans?” He asked, thinking that Petunia would be more willing to reveal the boy’s location now that she thought she knew him.

“Fans? He would shudder to hear you say that, I’m sure. I’ve sent him to school, and that’s all you need to know.” She said, with a hard little smile clearly telling him he had lost. He got a vague image of Potter (the boy looked ghastly, he would admit that) standing with a man, obviously a Muggle, holding some kind of bag. The man looked like a teacher at the school. No name of the institution came up.

“Mrs. Dursley, please remember that Voldemort can find and attack Harry at any time while he is out of this house.” Petunia turned to Dumbledore and smirked.

“Exactly. Voldemort can find him, and has found him. At. Your. School. He has managed to find Harry at Hogwarts several times. And you let him.” Petunia was about to pull a large bluff, but she needed to make her point. “Oh, yes. The boy told me. He told me that you allowed an untrained boy to face a fully trained wizard. Not anymore.” She paused, glaring at all three wizards in turn. “I am formally announcing now that Harry Potter will not be attending Hogwarts this school year. If you show up here again, I will notify the authorities. Harry taught me how to do so.” She stood, ending the interview.

“Mrs. Dursley, I do not think you understand this situation.” Dumbledore said, allowing his anger to show through.

“I believe my wife told you the boy will not be going back to your school.” Vernon Dursley entered the living room and glared. “We’ve

followed your instructions about the boy up to this point. My wife told me he almost died. No more, Dumbledore. He is our nephew, our responsibility, and now we will do what we like, including keeping him from the magic you're so fond of." Vernon Dursley stepped forward and glared at Dumbledore. "Get out." He spat at the three wizards. "Now." The wards tightened around Dumbledore again, threatening his magic, as Petunia and Vernon Dursley glared at him. Dumbledore backed away from the couple, telling the wards he was leaving and that he wasn't going to harm anyone there under protection. Dumbledore led the others from the house, seeing the boy's cousin sitting on the stairs, directing a gaze full of hate to their backs. Fawkes appeared again and transported all three back to his office.

"Gentlemen, I believe that we have a serious problem." Dumbledore told the two professors. "Call the Order." Professor Zareh nodded and disappeared down the stairs to send off messages. "We have a serious problem." Dumbledore said to himself as he petted Fawkes.

Author's Note: Okay, so I'm not quite finished with the events of September first. This chappie was getting a little long, so I thought that you would like a shorter chapter sooner, than a longer chapter later. Err, yeah. Let me know what you thought!

Author's Note: And here we go again!

"You're okay?" Harry said into the telephone. "You did what?" Harry dropped the phone and collapsed into laughter. Paul caught the phone as it fell and moved it to his own ear.

"What did you say?" Paul asked Petunia.

"Oh, I gave one of his teachers, his most intimidating one, a black eye. It was healed when he came back with the headmaster, but I'm sure he'll remember it." Petunia told Paul with an obvious pride in her voice. Harry's laughter died down a bit. "How is he doing?" she asked a little nervously.

"He's getting there. He seems to like Joe." Harry sat up from the floor and looked at Paul with one of his eyebrows raised.

"You can stop talking about me as if I'm not here." He said with a smile. "May I have my aunt back?"

"Harry wants you back." Paul handed off the phone to Harry and sat back in his chair.

"You hit Snape?" Harry asked excitedly. Paul studied Harry over his hands as the boy talked to his relation. Something had changed there. Perhaps Harry would be willing to start joint counseling sessions with his aunt. Harry hung up the phone just a few seconds later after thanking his aunt for returning his call as promised and smiled up at Paul. "She hit Snape." Harry said with a smile. "She gave Snape a black eye. She, Petunia Dursley, is the envy of almost every student at Hogwarts." Paul smiled and motioned Harry to the couch.

"He can't be that bad, can he?" Paul asked. Harry's look told him otherwise. "Huh." A noise from the corner of the room startled him and he looked up to find a beautiful red and gold bird had appeared in flames? "What?" He asked. A strangled noise from Harry caused Paul to look at his charge. "Harry? What's wrong?"

“Fawkes.” Harry said in a dead voice. “Dumbledore can find me now.”

If one of the students had managed to look out of a window that night, he would have witnessed the arrival of every single Order member at the gates of Hogwarts. Some Apparated in. Others had the use of Portkeys. A few flew. No matter the method of transportation, none hesitated to start straight up to the castle. Some ran up the path, others walked. One leaned heavily on a cane as he pulled his shabby robes around him in an attempt to ward off the encroaching chill. His amber eyes lifted to regard the castle for a few minutes before he made his way towards it.

The entry looked the same as it always did as he found the Great Hall. Order members, old and new, milled around the Hall as though it was home. Different tables each offered one of the day's main meals, as well as normal refreshments. Translation spells hovered over the entire hall, allowing everyone to understand the others with the least amount of effort. Order members were no longer confined to England. Once Fudge had alerted the wizarding community that Voldemort was alive and well (unfortunately), the Order had full backing from the Ministry. As such, Dumbledore had reached out and contacted other countries. Many had sent representatives to join the Order and promised help in the upcoming war. No one wanted to appear to be against Dumbledore at this point. Everyone knew that he was the only one able to stand against Voldemort with any success.

The mood changed when he entered the room. Quiet awe came from the younger generation, while the older gave him grudging respect. He knew what they were all thinking. He's a war hero. He has lost his best friend. He's letting the wolf win. Remus made no move to correct them. Let them think that.

Dumbledore had effectively retired him after the death of Sirius. He was a resource, someone sought out for advice or knowledge. He was no longer a fighter. That suited him for now. He had no wish to watch others die any longer. One of the older Weasley boys, Charlie, leapt up from his seat to guide Remus to a chair of his own. He nodded his thanks and accepted a cup of tea from Molly. He watched as the door opened again to admit Dumbledore's brilliant plan, the

Hogwarts' Protectors. They were so young. They had no idea what they were getting themselves into. Glory. Honor. At what cost? His eyes searched the students, looking for the familiar untidy mop of black hair. He had not wanted Harry moved from Gryffindor Tower, but Albus was adamant that Harry needed to train. Remus agreed with him in principle, but that didn't mean Remus liked it. A shape settled into the chair next to him.

"You're looking worse for the wear, wolf." Snape sneered at him. Remus knew him well enough to read between the lines and nodded.

"I've been worse, Severus. Thank you for asking." His eyes returned to the crowd and found Draco Malfoy. "It appears that Draco is settling in." Severus folded his arms with no indication he had heard. His voice came a few seconds later.

"He is floundering around his peers, especially the Slytherins and Gryffindors. He'll be fine." Severus's pride was obvious in his voice, but his face was the same stony mask it had always been. Remus's eyes returned to the crowd of children. Where was Harry?

"It changes you, doesn't it?" Remus said quietly. "When one of your students becomes more than a student." Severus nodded once.

"Yes, well, if the Dark Lord doesn't manage to kill me..." Remus knew what the man had not said. The worry for him will. Remus turned back to the students. Untidy black hair. Untidy black hair. "He's not here." Severus said quietly next to him.

"Who's not?" Remus asked. Surely he didn't mean...

"Potter. He didn't arrive with the others and he is not at his aunt's house. She said she sent him to another school. No one knows where." Remus sat back in shock. Harry? Not here? He was in danger if he wasn't at his aunt's home or Hogwarts. Where was he? Was he okay? Happy? Miserable? Was he having nightmares? Was he clearing his mind? Was he safe? "Don't fret so." Severus sneered in a mocking tone of voice. "He is the Boy Who Lived with some amazing luck." Remus was not sure if that was a reassurance or not.

They had to find him! Remus could not let anything happen to hi. He could never forgive himself if something happened to Harry. A burst of flames above him distracted him from his increasing panic. He looked up as Fawkes appeared. The bird hovered in front of him until he offered his arm as a perch. Fawkes settled down on his arm and started preening his fathers. Remus's lips twitched at the bird's actions, panic momentarily forgotten.

Dumbledore came in from the side door and called the meeting to order. Students and adults alike dropped into seats on the benches and faced the aged headmaster. "Thank you all for responding so quickly to the summons. I realized that this is not a regularly scheduled meeting, but something has happened and needs our immediate and discrete response." He paused to look over the people facing him. "Harry Potter is missing." The adults gathered began questioning his disappearance while the students merely blinked. No one had known that he was actually missing. Dumbledore waved everyone into silence once again. "The exact date of his disappearance is unknown, but we do know that he was still in his home on the date of the Hogsmeade attack. Visits to his home have given us no information." Fawkes shifting called Remus's attention back to him. Remus smiled a bit at the creature, stroking his chest feathers with a crooked finger. The bird's eyes caught his own, and for almost a minute, Remus found images displayed for him. Of Harry! Harry running with another boy. Harry studying. Harry crying, held and comforted by a kind-looking man. Harry on a stage. Harry laughing with boys near his age. Harry waking from a nightmare, only to be comforted by the same man. Remus blinked and the moment ended with a whisper. Go to his aunt.

"Remus, have you heard from Harry?" Remus looked up to see Dumbledore looking at him expectantly. It appeared that Dumbledore had repeated the question.

"No, Albus, I have not." He answered truthfully. Dumbledore turned back to the crowd.

"You should find in front of you the most recent photograph we have of Harry Potter. I like to think that he is in an English-speaking country,

but that does not eliminate other countries. Please circulate the photographs with your law enforcement, schools, and travel agencies. Harry may be trying to come here, but be without resources to do so.” Remus regarded the photograph. Harry was staring off into the distance. His gaze shifted towards the camera for a few seconds before his eyes moved off again. The boy Fawkes had shown him looked so much more like a child. Happier. Lighter. This one was so...serious. “In the unlikely event that one of you should see Harry himself, tell him the location of our original headquarters, however small that may be now.” Dumbledore said with a light smile. The Order had outgrown their house. “That should be enough to garner his trust and allow you to bring him here.” Dumbledore paused, as though considering something. “If that is not enough, I authorize you all to use a light Stunning curse. I know that that is not traditionally acceptable, but I must remind you that the longer he is not here, safe and sound, the longer Voldemort has to find him.” Most of the crowd flinched at the name of the Dark Lord.

Remus decided that he had had enough and pretended to doze off. The status of “retired war hero” gave him many privileges outside the bounds of normal decorum and those privileges allowed him to act like an overtired great uncle humored for his many eccentricities. Fawkes fluttered off his arm and to the top of his chair. A snort came from the man sitting next to him. “Wolf!” Snape hissed. “Lupin!” Remus ignored him and let out a light snore. “Oh, for the...” Remus watched through his lashes as Snape stood and motioned to someone. Draco Malfoy stood and came over to Snape. Remus noticed that Dumbledore had moved on to regional meetings, speaking with the leaders of each region on what they had observed or witnessed. He had not noticed that Remus had “fallen asleep” “Lupin!” Snape hissed again, shaking Remus by the shoulder. Remus opened his eyes and looked up at Snape. “You dozed off. You should go home, as you are not fit to be here. Obviously.” He motioned to the boy standing next to him. “Draco will help you to the gates.”

“Oh, thank you, Severus, but I am quite capable...” Snape cut him off by waving his protest away.

“For my peace of mind. Goodness knows what Albus will do if anything happens to you.” He gave a look to Draco before going to join his own regional team. Remus got to his feet and took his cane when the boy handed it to him.

“Well, Master Malfoy, let’s go, for Severus’s ‘peace of mind’.” The boy smiled a bit and offered his arm. “I’m not that old.” He complained, moving forward on his cane. Draco nodded and walked beside him as Remus left the Great Hall and started down the stairs. “How have you been doing since your inheritance?” Remus asked.

“As well as can be expected, sir.” Draco returned. “Thank you for asking.” Remus nodded, holding his walking to a plod while Draco strolled next to him.

“I hope your mother is well?” Draco smiled a little at this and relaxed a bit.

“She is...adjusting nicely to her new circumstances. I’ve set her to a new project, one that she seems to enjoy, making an orphanage for the victims of the war.” Remus turned a bit to look at the boy. Draco looked pained, or in pain, he wasn’t sure. One hand reached up to rub the scar on his face before he became aware of his actions and jerked his hand back to his side.

“Well done, lad. Well done.” Remus noticed the faint color of embarrassment in Draco’s cheeks. He did not miss the please smile the boy gave. “If you ever need an ear, come find me. That seems to be the only thing I’m good for nowadays.”

“I’ll do that, sir.” Remus fell silent as they reached the gate.

“You’d better go back now.” Remus told him. “I’ll watch you until you are at the door.” Remus’s face told Draco not to argue. He waved to Draco when the boy reached the doors and shut them behind him. Remus took out his wand and raised it. The triple-decker bus appeared in front of him with its customary bang and Stan Shunpike hopped off. “Number Four, Privet Drive. Little Whinging, Surrey, please, Stan.” Remus told him as he climbed aboard and chose a

bed. He nodded to acknowledge that it would take most of the night to reach and closed his eyes.

Severus Snape entered his quarters to find Draco waiting for him. "You should be in bed." He told the boy as he hung his robe and poured himself a drink. He paused, poured a second one, and handed it to Draco. "Six will come early for you." Severus told him as he settled into his favorite chair.

"I know." Draco took a sip from his glass and placed it on the table next to him. "Professor Lupin got off safely." He told his mentor, gazing into the fire in front of him.

"That wolf lucked out tonight. He's my age and everyone treats him as a loveable, tottery old bachelor." Draco figured out what Severus really meant and nodded.

"Sad, isn't it?" He said. Snape glanced up at him before turned his own eyes to the fire Draco had built. "I won't hover when that happens to you." His remark had the desired effect.

"I will never take such a far leave of my senses, Master Malfoy." Snape bit out. Draco nodded, reassured that the Potions Master would be around for quite a while, as long as no one killed him.

"So, Potter is really missing?" It was not a real question, but an affirmation of a statement.

"Missing defined as someone in the magical world knowing where he is?" Severus asked, relaxing into his chair. He closed his eyes and sighed. "Yes, he is missing." Severus opened one eye and looked Draco over. "Learn anything from his friends?"

"They're worried about him. They hope he is okay. That's about it." Draco drained his glass and returned it to the table. Severus waved his wand, changing Draco's robes to his favored night clothes.

“Bed. I’ll wake you in the morning.” Draco opened his mouth to argue. “I’ll alert Moody that you are with me. Bed. Now.” Draco shut his mouth and thanked him.

“Goodnight, Severus.” He said as he stood.

“Goodnight, Draco.” Draco moved to the room Severus had set up for him when he had first arrived and shut the door. Severus pulled himself out of his chair, moved to the fireplace, and dropped some Floo powder to make a firecall. “Moody!” The grotesque eye appeared in the fireplace. “Draco is with me.” Severus ended the call before Moody could protest and poured another drink. Where in the world was Potter? And why was he, Severus Snape, enemy of all things Potter, obligated to find the boy?

Hermione was in the common room, books spread around her and her “planner” in front of her. She had told the first years that she would be awake for a while, should one of them need her. This served two purposes. One, should someone need her, they knew she would be awake and available. Two, it kept the first years from sneaking out and exploring. Her planner flashed. She whispered the password and opened it.

-I’ll Force-choke him! Where is he?

-Which he?

-You know who I mean! Malfoy! Where is he?

-No Force-chokes, please. He’s wherever Ron is at the moment. Most likely with the Protectors.

-Just...just keep your guard up around him, please.

-Yes, Master.

-Mi, you know what I mean!

-Yes, Skywalker. I know. I’ll be careful.

-Promise?

-Yes. Promise.

-Good. I don't want to lose my 'sis'.

-Have you seen the third movie yet?

-No, why?

-Just asking. You'll love it by the way.

-It's Star Wars. How could I not? So, everyone is frantic, huh?

-Desperately so. Dumbledore held a prefect/protector meeting after the feast. Changes have taken place.

-Like what?

-No Quidditch this year.

-Oh, good. I'm not there.

-Students are not allowed on the grounds at all. Just in the inner courtyard. Curfew is at nine o'clock. All students, except the Heads, prefects, and Protectors, must be in their dormitories by that time.

-Ouch. Guess what?

-What?

-My aunt gave Snape a black eye!

-Bravo to Aunt Petunia! Wait a minute! Dumbledore sent Snape? Will he never learn?

-Yeah. Then, Dumbledore went to my house and my aunt told them off and my uncle basically kicked him and the other teachers out of the house.

-Wow. That's great.

-Oh, Mi. Do not look Snape or Dumbledore in the eye if they ask about me. They're both Legilimens. They can see your thoughts.

-Thanks for the warning. I'll scare them off by bursting into tears.

-When did I become so lucky to have been given a friend like you?

-You saved me from a troll.

-Oh, yeah. So, you think Neville may be our link to what the Protectors are doing?

-So far. Most of the DA is a part of the Protectors. Only people without a magical family are barred from participating.

-No one to protect the house while the kids are in school

-That's right. That's the reason I was not invited, or so I've heard.

-Why would Dumbledore make me join? The Dursleys are so anti-magic that the thought of one of them even thinking of touching a wand would kill them.

-Um, Skywalker? You are you.

-Ah. Should have known that. That explains it. So, everyone there is clueless about my whereabouts?

-Completely. You're enjoying this, aren't you?

-Yes. sheepish grin Fawkes was here earlier, just after the Snape fiasco at my aunt's house. I get the feeling he's going to keep my secret.

-Excellent. Be sure to carry your messenger. If I notice a large amount of the staff gone, I'll let you know.

-Thanks. Mi?

-Yes, Skywalker?

-Thanks. For everything.

-That's what friends are for. So, tell me about your play.

Author's Note: I hope you liked it. Let me know.

Author's Note: READ ME! My deepest condolences to everyone in Great Britain. Yes, the sixth book is out, but please don't tell me anything from it, as I have not read it yet. For those of you wondering, this story will continue on its original path and will not draw in elements of the sixth book. Only the first five. Okay, I'm sorry about the update. I know I haven't updated in two weeks. I have a boyfriend now (He's a nice and welcome surprise!), but now that we know how the other works (Minds out of the gutter, people!), I'll be updating again at my usual times. Thanks again to all for reading.

Questions:

Harry/Hermione: No.

Harry/OC: Unlikely. Highly unlikely.

Snape's Black Eye: There has been such a huge response to this that I will shortly be posting a stand-alone one chappie of Snape getting his black eye. Try not to riot too much out of happiness.

Remus: The man should have been in Slytherin, for all of his cunning. Think about his actions and you'll figure it out. His contact with Harry will be critical.

Number of chapters: No idea. It's going to be long. That's all I know. Of course, I could cut something out...

Wandless magic: Patience.

The pace: About to pick up. Hope you all can keep up.

"Behind door number two, a human! My perfect record stands!" Harry smiled at Zen's announcement from his cage.

"Hey, Harry. Give me just a second here, okay?" Harry nodded and went over to Zen's cage. Zen reared up and gave a fairly good imitation of a bow.

“Hello and good day, my lightening child!” Zen said with what Harry was calling his hyper voice. “Have you a mouse?” Zen eyed Harry with suspicion.

“No, no mouse. Sorry. Why do you keep calling me ‘lightening child’?” Harry asked in frustration.

“Lightening child is your name among the snakes, Harry. That is what we call you.” Zen paused and looked over at Paul. “Has he a mouse?” Harry shook his head and Zen’s head dropped in disappointment. “Pity.” He noticed Harry’s look. “You have a question?”

“How do snakes know about me? How do you know about me? You’ve been in a tank for years now.” Zen gave Harry a funny look and seemed to shrug, if snakes were able to shrug.

“There is more than one way of speaking. That is all I know.” He curled up on his warm rock and looked at Harry. “I can hear any snake that gets close to me. That is just the way of things.” Harry sighed and rubbed his eyes under his glasses.

“Can I never be normal?” Zen found this question extremely funny and nearly fell off his rock in laughter.

“Harry, lightening is never the same twice!” Harry glared for a few seconds before he laughed. Zen looked very funny when he laughed. He threw his head back, his mouth was as wide as it could go (small wonder that he could swallow a mouse whole), and the noise he made was nothing more than a very strange hissing.

“What’s that all about?” Paul asked as he came up behind Harry to look at Zen. It sounded like the snake was dying.

“He’s laughing.” Harry said with a small smile. “Zen is very odd, Paul. He finds the smallest things amusing.” Paul nodded. Zen looked at Harry again in a hopeful way. Harry shook his head. Paul did not

have a mouse for him. Paul made a small noise and moved back to his chair.

“So, how are you today?” Paul asked as he turned on the tape recorder. Harry sat on the couch and shrugged.

“Okay, I guess. Dumbledore hasn’t shown up yet, so I guess that Fawkes is keeping my secret for now.” Paul nodded. Sky said I’m getting better in my schoolwork.”

“That’s good.” Paul gave Harry a smile. “I knew you could do it.” Harry smiled and looked down. “You’re a smart kid.”

“Not as smart as Hermione.” Harry said. “She’s scary.” Paul smirked.

“I got that feeling around her. She is kind of scary.” Harry nodded. He picked up his pillow (he claimed that pillow as his own) and sighed.

“She had to go back to school. I’ll miss her visits.” Paul caught the odd note in Harry’s voice.

“Harry, are you okay?” Harry nodded.

“I’m fine.” Paul rolled his eyes at Harry’s answer.

“Yeah, right.” Paul drawled. “What’s bothering you?”

“ Nothing.” Paul sat back and looked Harry over. What had changed? What was different? Why was Harry withdrawing?

“You and Hermione must be good friends.” Paul started. “She must know everything about you by this point.”

“Not really. We’re mates, Hermione and I. Ron, too.” Paul leaned back in his chair. The way he said that...

“Well, who do you talk to when things become too much?” Harry abandoned his pillow and pulled his legs up.

“Ron and Hermione.” Harry’s answer came in a whisper. “Mostly.” Paul reached out and pulled Harry’s legs down. He looked Harry in the eye.

“Everything?” Harry hesitated before shaking his head. He didn’t tell Ron and Hermione everything. There was too much to be told. “Who do you talk to?” Harry shrugged. Ah, that explained it. “Do you have an adult you can go to for help?” Harry stood up and went over to Zen’s cage. Paul let him go. Harry seemed to rant better when standing.

“And tell them what?” Harry demanded sadly. Paul readied the tissue box. Harry was upset, extremely so, and Paul wanted to be prepared. “What would I tell them? ‘Professor, do you have a minute? Oh, it’s nothing. Voldemort got into my head again and asked me to join him’ or ‘You know, I don’t want to fight in this war’.” Harry rubbed his face, sighed, and wrapped his arms around himself. “They wouldn’t understand.” He sniffed. “They can’t understand.” He gave a shaky breath. “I can’t do that.” Paul stood and went over to Harry. He was shocked to find that side of the office freezing. He pulled Harry to the warm side and sat on the couch with him. He offered the tissue box and smiled when Harry took one.

“Harry? I would like for you to tell an adult, any adult, what you are feeling. How this war against Voldemort is affecting you. Just try.” Harry looked up at Paul, staring at him as though he had gained a few new limbs and offered to show Harry how to do the same thing.

“What do you want me to tell them?” Harry bit out. Paul wondered if his office was always this cold. “That I wonder if I will survive this war? That my friends may die, and I don’t want to see them die? That I will be alone if they do, and I hate being alone?” Paul had a feeling Harry was coming, the real one. The boy was nearing hysteria. “That Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Just-Won’t-Die, is afraid of doing exactly that? Or even worse, that I don’t want to be apart of this war? That I don’t want to be a hero!” Paul reached out and took hold of Harry’s shoulders.

“Yes.” The firm word and grip caused Harry to stop in surprise, opening and closing his hands as though searching for something, pondering over an entirely foreign concept. “Yes, Harry. Just like you told me.” Paul made eye contact with Harry, watching as several emotions played through Harry’s eyes, each more rapid than the last. Paul noticed the hand movements and pulled Harry towards him a bit. The boy did the rest. Harry’s arms went around Paul and his face came to rest on Paul’s shoulder.

“I’m scared.” He whispered. Paul tightened his hold as Harry began shaking. “I shouldn’t be, but I am.” Paul reached up and carded a hand through Harry’s hair. “Voldemort wants me dead, and I’m afraid that he’ll kill the rest of my friends to get to me. I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want anyone to die.” Harry did not speak above his initial whisper, and Paul didn’t ask him to speak up. “I don’t want to be alone.” The last statement strangled Harry as he fought back tears. Paul held him as Harry allowed a few pent up tears to escape.

“You’re not alone. Not anymore.” Harry’s grip only tightened around Paul. Paul didn’t need to hear Harry say thank you. He felt it. “You’ve got me.”

Paul walked Harry down to the gym after their session. Harry was subdued, quiet, and introspective. Paul figured that Harry was thinking over something Paul had said. “Paul, do you believe in fate?” Harry’s question broke their silence. Paul looked down at him and smiled.

“It matters not how strait the gate/How charged with punishments the scroll/I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” Paul ruffled Harry’s hair and smiled again. “I believe our lives are what we make, regardless of other forces.” Harry nodded and fell silent. He paused at the door of the gym.

“Thanks, Paul.” Paul nodded and shooed Harry to the door.

“Sensei’s waiting.” Harry smiled and went through the door. Harry was getting there. He just needed some time.

“Again!” Harry allowed his arms to rest a second before falling back into his stance. Sensei was being hard on him today. Harry had no

idea why Sensei was acting this way, and Rick seemed just as clueless as Harry. "Front rolls." Harry stifled a groan, because this was going to hurt and started the set. He was the last one left. The entire class had been dismissed ten minutes early and Harry had heard every single person say that they were grateful for the early dismissal. He had been kept behind. "Back rolls." Harry had a feeling he was going to be very dizzy and in a lot of pain at the end of this. He only hoped Sensei would let him go in time for rehearsal. "Stop." Harry gave his equilibrium a second to reset before gaining his feet. "Run." Sensei made a circular motion with his finger. "Three times." Harry and Rick fell in side by side and ran the perimeter of the gym. Every time they reached the starting point, Sensei would tell them to go faster. By the time they finished the last lap, Harry was nearly running full speed. "Enough." Harry decided that that was his favorite word. "Report at seven this Saturday."

"Yes, Sensei." Sensei motioned to the showers and Harry went to them with no hesitation. He rushed through his shower to find Rick waiting with the Tiger Balm. Harry removed his shirt without being told and sat down, forgetting one little thing that was different from the last time Rick had done this.

"Evan, what?" Harry cut him off with a gesture.

"I don't want to talk about it." He told Rick with a voice that told the other he would accept no argument.

"But..." Harry shook his head. He didn't want anyone else to know. "Fine." Rick started to work on his shoulders. "I don't know why he was so hard on you today." Rick told him. Harry didn't have the energy to shrug. "He must see something. Or have an idea." The tone told Harry that Rick was fishing for information. Harry obediently raised an arm when Rick tried to get at his side. "Everything must hurt, huh?"

"Head to toe." Harry answered. Rick didn't answer him, just gave an odd little snort. Harry felt Rick nudge him into a more relaxed position and Rick started on his back, carefully avoiding a few select spots.

“Ow.” Harry complained. Something back there was tender. Very tender. Rick dropped his hands.

“That hurt?” He asked as he rubbed the spot again.

“Ow! Yes!” Harry tried to jerk away, but one of Rick’s hands kept him in place. Rick left, stuck his head out the door of the locker room, and came back, Sensei with him. Harry wished he could be invisible.

“Look!” Rick snapped. Harry pulled his knees up and rested his forehead on them. His eyes fell shut as Sensei’s hands went to his back and traced the new marks there. He could feel the eyes boring into his back, looking it over. He hissed when Sensei brushed the spot Rick had found earlier.

“Why did you not tell us?” Sensei demanded. Harry clenched his eyes tighter and tried to keep back the strange feelings of having disappointed someone. Sensei came around to the front of Harry and crouched down to look at him.

“It only hurts when touched. The others don’t hurt at all.” Harry told him. Sensei’s mouth became a firm line. “I didn’t think it mattered.” Sensei growled and grabbed Harry’s legs to pull them down. He froze when Harry hissed again. Sensei yanked the pants leg up and inspected another bruise.

“That,” he pointed to the combined lump and bruise, “does not matter?” he demanded of Harry. “When you are hurt, no matter how insignificant you think, you will tell me. Why I did not know beforehand, I do not know. I am calling your drama teacher and excusing you from practice.” Harry could not work up the courage to protest. He was sufficiently frightened of his teacher enough. Sensei leaned down and picked him up from the bench. Harry latched onto his shirt until Sensei put him down on the table he used to inspect student injuries. Sensei gave him a look, but didn’t say anything. He turned to Rick. “Ice him. You know how.” Rick nodded and started to dig in the nearby first aid kit for ice packs.

“I would not move if I were you.” Rick told Harry. Harry changed his plan of running for it, consequences be damned, and removed his foot from the floor. It appeared that the father had passed on his ability to see things without eyes. Rick returned with two ice packs and two towels. He eyed Harry for a minute before sighing. “You’d better lie on your stomach.” Harry did as he was told and hid his face in his arms. Rick arranged the ice packs and sat down next to the table.

“He’s angry with me.” Harry said simply, trying to ignore the feeling that Rick was angry as well.

“He’s angry at you for not telling him you’re hurt. He is mostly angry with himself for not seeing that you were hurt.” Harry shrugged.

“I’ve had worse. Besides, it’s not like he could have known.” Harry told Rick. He sighed as the ice numbed some of the pain he had been feeling from Sensei’s prodding.

“Yeah. Those scars tell me that.” Rick’s sardonic reply made Harry wince. He stiffened then, but didn’t say anything. Rick was already upset with him. “Where’d they come from?” Harry didn’t reply. He clenched his jaw as memories came back to him. They had come from a dream.

Harry did not open his eyes as familiar sensations came to the front of his mind. He wondered if ignoring the intruder would make him go away. “Harry.” Oh, darn. He rolled over and opened his eyes to see Voldemort staring down at him. “Welcome back.” Harry got to his feet, crossed his arms, and glared. He did not want to be here, and he made sure Voldemort knew that. “Your glares need work.” What a surreal statement.

“You’re lecturing me on glaring?” Harry asked, incredulous at Voldemort’s comment. “I’ve gone mad.” Harry muttered to himself. He sank to the floor and tried to bring back his sanity. It eluded him.

“You going mad would solve several of my problems. Please, don’t stop yourself on my account.” Harry glared again and imagined

Snape on the receiving end. Voldemort sneered at him. "Pathetic." Harry rolled his eyes and climbed to his feet.

"Why did you pull me from my dreams this time?" Harry knew he looked horrible, as he hadn't really slept the night before. Not for long, anyway. He had been reading the Occlumency books between the patrols of Jack, trying to figure out what it meant by "force of will". Did it mean he had to be stubborn to force someone out of his mind, or something else? He had hoped that the author, Hadrain Alisander, would define it, but no such luck so far. It remained a mystery.

"Have you thought about my offer?" Voldemort waved his wand and the usual comfortable room appeared. The Dark Lord lowered himself into a chair and motioned for Harry to do the same.

"My answer is still no." Harry told him. He shook his head at the offer of the chair. "I prefer to stand, thank you." Voldemort gave a disappointed sigh.

"I thought that you might say that." Harry hated the feeling that sigh gave him, like he had disappointed someone important to him. This was Voldemort. He shouldn't feel like this. Voldemort pulled out his wand and pointed it at Harry. "Either sit down or I'll make you." Harry moved forward and sat on the edge of the chair. Choose your battles. That piece of advice sounded like Sensei. Harry motioned for Voldemort to continue. If he kept the man talking long enough, someone might wake him before Voldemort resumed his Dark Lord personae.

"Now, as I was saying, I can offer you a lot. A young man," Harry distinctly remembered Voldemort calling him a boy or child on several occasions "like you, needs guidance in the wizarding world. I can offer that guidance. There is so much you don't know about wizarding society that you should know. Things that Dumbledore has neglected to tell you." Twist the knife a bit more, why don't you? Harry refrained from glaring. "You would be free from his influence and control. The Ministry would not be able to stop you. You would answer to me. Only me. My second in command." Voldemort mistook Harry sitting up as interest. "My heir, if you will."

Oh. My. God. All right, Harry. Time to bring out your Slytherin side. Just don't look him in the eye. "You mean that I could boss around the Death Eaters?" He asked as he stared into the fireplace. He had schooled his face carefully to look uninterested as possible. He was tiring fast. He had to play this carefully.

"Within reason." Voldemort answered. "They, too, would help to train you. They have a lot to teach you." Harry stared into the fire, allowed his body to relax the slightest bit as he grew a bit more fatigued, and shook his head. Voldemort looked him over and smirked. "Of course, I'll have to free a few from Azkaban if I am to let them teach you. You and your friends cost me a few of my servants." Harry shrugged.

"That's why you want me, isn't it?" Voldemort's expression darkened a bit. Oops. "Unless you have another reason." Harry amended. No need to anger him.

"I have several." Voldemort told him. He conjured a tea tray and Harry was struck by the realization that Voldemort and Dumbledore both relied on food of some sort when dealing with him. "I can make you so much more than you are. So much more a wizard." Harry collapsed backward in the chair and sighed. Voldemort seemed pleased that Harry was so tired. The dream thing that Voldmeort did always exhausted him.

"Can I go back to sleep now?" he asked. He tried not to whine.

"In a minute." Harry wanted to ask Voldemort to promise, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He was just so tired. Harry stared into the fire, all but forgetting Voldemort's presence. Paul would wake him, right? Or maybe Jack. Harry would even take Aunt Petunia at this point. He was so focused on his thoughts that he didn't hear Voldemort calling his name. A hand grabbed his arm and he reacted out of instinct. He twisted out of the grasp, slid out of the chair sideways, and proceeded to put as much distance as possible between he and his attacker. His back hit a wall and he proceeded to imitate a ball the best he could without transfiguring himself into one.

Harry started to figure out what had happened. Voldemort. No wonder he had overreacted (some would have said “panicked”, but Harry disliked the word). Harry was surprised Voldemort hadn’t cursed him yet. Harry raised a hand to his scar, took a deep breath, and then looked up.

Voldemort was only standing there, staring at Harry as though he had never seen him before. Take it a little further, Potter. Harry looked around, as though he was searching for something, or in this case, someone. Let Voldemort draw his own conclusions. He uncurled his legs and stood, using the wall behind him for support. “Sorry.” He said tiredly. “You, uh, startled me.” Voldemort gave a shaky nod. Harry studied his toes. He flinched when two quick stings happened on his chest and back. He looked up at Voldemort. What?

“Our first lesson. Pay attention to your surroundings.” Voldemort lowered his wand. Harry glared at him, fury giving him energy he had thought he did not have.

“I did not say I wanted your training.” Harry said through his teeth. He held himself very still. He had an idea of what Voldemort had just did, and he wasn’t happy about it. The Dark Lord flicked his wand at Harry and Harry felt two more lashes appear. He hadn’t even seen a spell.

“You need it, more than you know.” This wasn’t supposed to happen. “In fact, you don’t have a choice anymore.” Harry was grateful for the wall supporting him, because he wasn’t sure his legs couldn’t hold his full weight.

“ ‘Offer’ implies that there is a choice.” Harry snapped. Voldemort flicked his wand twice more. Harry dodged, but this spell, or whatever it was, seemed to home in on him.

“It is no longer an offer. It is a privilege that I am giving you.” Oh joy. Harry could feel his legs trembling. He sucked in air through his teeth as another lash joined the others. “Now, what is the first lesson?”

“Get out of my mind.” Harry told him.

“Crucio!” Harry fell back against the wall, further aggravating the lashes Voldemort had given him. The Dark Lord lifted the spell and came to stand over Harry. “This is for your own good.” Voldemort told him. Harry gave him a weak glare.

“Another Dumbledore.” He sneered. Another lash fell on his chest, followed by a short Crucio. Oh, the Crucio made the lashings burn. It felt like Voldemort was rubbing salt into them with steel wool. Tears leaked out the sides of Harry’s eyes.

“Now, what is your first lesson?” Voldemort asked, almost sounding like McGonagall asking for a definition from the class. Harry would have laughed if he hadn’t been in such pain. He took a deep breath, held it, and let it out. He didn’t bother trying to sit up. He knew he wouldn’t make it.

“Pay attention to my surroundings.” Harry told him. Voldemort gave him a pleased smile. “Sir.” Voldemort’s smile grew wider at the term of respect. Bravo, Harry! The Dark Lord raised his wand and Harry braced himself for more pain. He was surprised when he heard a sleep charm.

“I’ll see you soon.” Voldemort promised him as Harry faded away.

Harry jerked awake at the desk in his room. He had fallen asleep on his books and without clearing his mind. Perfect. He hissed when the skin on his back and chest pulled. He shook the slightest bit from the Cruciatus Curse, but he still smiled. Potter: 1. Voldemort: 0.

He ignored the pain. It was a small price to pay for what he was planning. Besides, some of the things he was learning from the books Hermione had given him made him confident that he could handle it. It was the first time he had planned something and felt confident about it. He felt like a Slytherin. This was something he could do on his own. He did not tell Paul.

Remus climbed down from the bus and allowed it to speed away. He stood and regarded the little house sitting in front of him. He had just reached Number Four Privet Drive. It looked completely ordinary.

Who knew that the Boy Who Lived grew up here? He knew that the Dursleys hadn't exactly been kind to Harry. He only hoped that he would be able to talk to Petunia long enough to be reassured that Harry was fine. It would be even better if Harry was fine and happy. He knew he wouldn't find out anything standing there staring at the house. He went up the walk and rang the doorbell.

Author's Note: I hope you all liked the longer chapter. Let me know.

Author's Note: I'm working on the Snape side chapter. It should be up soon. Thanks for all your wonderful reviews!

Questions:

Harry's bruises/scars: The bruises he got while training with Sensei. The scars came from Voldemort.

Neville: He will not be "pulling a Wormtail". Neville was drafted for the Protectors because he fit Dumbledore's criteria.

Length of story/cutting things out: Long. / Okay, due to your demands (and threats), I won't cut anything out. It may take me a little while longer to finish and you getting all your answers.

Lessons with Voldemort: The response has been dramatic. I will not tell you what Harry is planning, what he meant by the score thing, or if he will be corrupted by Voldemort. You will all find out in time.

Family therapy/Dursleys: It's coming. Just not yet. Harry has a few things to talk about first.

Mass of OCs: Rick brought out one of Harry's issues. Sparky has an eating disorder. The mass of OCs will be important. Have some patience.

On to the story!

Remus climbed down from the bus and allowed it to speed away. He stood and regarded the little house sitting in front of him. He had just reached Number Four Privet Drive. It looked completely ordinary. Who knew that the Boy Who Lived grew up here? He knew that the Dursleys hadn't exactly been kind to Harry. He only hoped that he would be able to talk to Petunia long enough to be reassured that Harry was fine. It would be even better if Harry was fine and happy. He knew he wouldn't find out anything standing there staring at the house. He went up the walk and rang the doorbell.

A boy, a rather large boy, opened the door to stare at him. "Ah, you must be Dudley Dursley." The blonde boy nodded. "Is your mother at home?"

"Yes. Would you like to come in?" Dudley asked, eyeing Remus's cane. Remus gave him a smile and nodded.

"I would like that very much, young man. Could you tell your mother that Remus Lupin is here to speak with her?" Dudley rushed off after directing Lupin to the sitting room. Remus looked around the comfortable dwelling and knew that the furniture did not match the occupants of the house.

"If you're from that school, I have nothing to say to you." Petunia said from the doorway, disapproval covering her features. Remus turned and held out his hand in greeting.

"No, Mrs. Dursley. I am not from Hogwarts." He told her. "I think we've met before, many years ago." He told her.

"When my sister was in school. Yes, I remember you. Why are you here?" She asked.

"I am just a...well, I suppose you could call me a friend...of Harry's." Remus explained. Petunia gestured to an overstuffed arm chair. Remus sank into it and sighed as his weary bones settled. The Knight Bus was not the most comfortable method of travel. "Harry's headmaster told me that Harry has not shown up for the next term. He asked if I had heard from him, and I have not." He noticed that Petunia was glaring at him.

"If you think that I'm going to tell you where he is..." Remus smiled and shook his head.

"No, Mrs. Dursley." He let the words out with a small laugh. "I'm not here for that at all." Petunia calmed but still gave Remus a suspicious look. "I was wondering if you could tell me how he is. Does Harry like his new school? Is he happy there?" Petunia sat back in her chair.

“This is a pleasant change.” She confided. “It is not the interrogation I had resigned myself to expect from you...magical folk.” She paused and looked him over. “May I offer you something to drink, Professor Lupin?”

“Whatever you have handy, as long as it is not an inconvenience.” Remus accepted. She nodded and left the room to return with lemonade and biscuits a few minutes later.

“How do you know Harry?” She asked. Remus smiled. It seemed that Petunia had gained a newfound interest in her nephew.

“I knew him when he was a baby, through his parents, of course. I was good friends with Lily and James before they died. I was also his teacher in his third year for Defense Against the Dark Arts.”

“His teacher? Was he a good student?” Petunia asked. Remus smiled at the question.

“Oh, yes. Very gifted, very bright. He was very determined to learn something when he put his mind to it.” Memories of the Patronus came back to him. “He managed a corporal Patronus that year.” He told her, his pride evident in his voice.

“Is that...good?” She asked.

“Good? Mrs. Dursley, there are some fully trained wizards who still cannot manage it. The fact that he did it at thirteen...the mind boggles.” He gave her another smile and took a sip of his lemonade. “This is excellent.”

“Thank you.” She pulled out some papers from her pocket. “You said you wanted to know how he is.”

“Yes, I would.” Remus told her. Petunia unfolded the papers she held.

“I just received a progress report yesterday.” She looked over the papers. “I think that it would be easier if you were to read it.” Remus took the offered report and looked down. Type print filled the page.

Harry continues to improve in his classes. His tutor is very satisfied with his progress and hopes to mainstream every subject very soon. His art teacher raves about his work on a daily basis and must beg Harry to allow his work to be displayed. His physical education teacher (I believe you met Sensei Leonard?) says that his progress is acceptable, which is high praise from that man. Harry’s drama teacher loves Harry’s talent for monologue and hopes that his physical acting will match. I’ll allow Harry to tell you more about that.

Harry continues his progress with me and seems to be warming up to Joe. I will inform you of any serious issues and will schedule your first family session when Harry seems ready.

Dr. Paul Lauter

“A doctor?” Remus asked. Petunia nodded. “A doctor of what?”

“The boy changed from last year. Drastic changes. He had horrible nightmares to the point that he started sleeping during the day so that someone could wake him. He could not eat much, because those dreams upset him so much. He seemed to have lost interest in everything. I couldn’t even interest him in his homework. I found someone who could help him.” Remus filled in the blanks she had left.

“You sent him to a Muggle mental hospital?” he asked. She shook her head.

“It is a school with the capacity to help children who need it.” She explained. “I’ve visited it and I liked what I saw.” She drew herself up and stared down at him. “He is eating three meals a day, plus snacks. He can sleep through the night without nightmares waking him every few minutes. His doctor said that the boy made the decision to stay at the school without any outside influence, rather than return to Hoggity’s. He’s making friends and seems happy there.” She stared at Remus as though daring him to object. “I think that’s better than

“You can sit up now, if you like.” Harry waited until Sensei moved his hand before swinging himself upright. “Ouch.” Harry noticed Dan staring at his chest. He wrapped his arms around himself until Sensei growled. Harry dropped his arms and tried to make himself smaller. It wasn’t working. “I have just a few questions for you.” Dan pulled out a clipboard and attached several sheets. “How long have you been injured?”

“Two days.” Harry answered truthfully.

“Is the pain constant, or only when touched?” Dan made some marks on the paper.

“Only when touched.” Harry folded his arms and looked down at the ground.

“Where did the scars on your back and chest come from?” Harry closed his mouth and tried to ignore the man. Dan looked him over and wrote something. “Did someone in your family do that?” Harry shook his head. “Are you sure?” Harry nodded. Dan smiled and rummaged in his bag for something. He moved his chair closer to Harry and patted his knee. Harry gave him a quizzical look.

“Injured leg here, please.” Harry did as he was told. “This wrap will help support the injury and take some of the swelling down. You’re lucky. Nothing’s broken, just bruised and tender. No martial arts participation for the next seven days, when I look you over again. I want you to stay off this leg as much as possible. Your nurses will know that you will need to ice your injuries and will remind you to do so. I expect you to do so for an hour. Ten minutes on, and ten minutes off.” Harry nodded his understanding. That didn’t seem like a lot. He could study then. “You don’t have a bruise on your back...yet. It’ll show up in the next day or so. Ice it too.” He clipped the end of the bandage and closed the clasps. “When it does show up, it will be a spectacular color.” He allowed Harry to move his leg again and took out a bottle. “These are light painkillers. I’m going to give you two now and I’ll make sure that there are two for morning medication tomorrow.” Harry knew that some of his floor mates took medication

every morning, while others, himself included, took medication at night. "If you're still in pain after that, tell one of your nurses. They'll know what to give you."

"Thank you, sir." Harry said quietly. Sensei gave Harry a water bottle and Dan held out the painkillers. Harry swallowed the pills and drank a little water. Dan dug into his bag again and brought out some lollipops. Harry looked at him, just a little perplexed. It was another Dumbledore!

"Come on, Evan. I don't bite." Rick danced in place next to Harry. Harry guessed that candy from a doctor was common and Rick wanted one. Harry reached out hesitantly and took a green one.

"I'm sick!" Rick gave a horrible impression of a cough. Sensei rolled his eyes. Harry had a feeling that this was a common occurrence between Rick and Dan. Dan smiled and gave Harry a wink before turning to Rick.

"Since you and Sensei were such good patients last time." Rick took a red one and Sensei looked like he was about to tell the man what he could do with the treats when he noticed Harry watching him. He took one, unwrapped it, and popped it in his mouth.

"Sugar-free." He turned and walked to his office. Rick laughed after Sensei left. Harry looked at him for an explanation.

"Dan could tell you some pretty funny stories about trying to treat my dad." Dan groaned and buried his face in his hands.

"Don't remind me. A more stubborn man could not exist on the earth." Harry smiled a bit. "If I tell the man to lie down for an hour, I'm lucky if he stays down for a minute. Let's just forget that I have studied medicine. He knows better." Harry smiled again. "You're done, Evan. Just remember to ice them, rest your leg, and ask for painkillers if you need them."

"I will. Thank you, sir." Harry went back to his locker and changed out of sight of Dan and Rick (Rick was trying to get another sweet)

and went to Sensei's office. The door was open but he knocked anyway.

"Have a seat." Sensei said without looking up. Sensei stood and shut the door. Harry studied his shoes. Sensei seemed content to stare at Harry.

"The man who threatens you gave you those scars." Harry didn't need to confirm it. Sensei knew. "That is why you did not want to discuss them." Harry nodded. "Understandable." Sensei sat back and studied him. Harry decided to end this quickly so he could use his unexpected free afternoon to study his magic books. He could forget about this over the complexities of Transfiguration.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think it was important." Sensei didn't say anything right way, but when he did speak, it caught Harry's attention.

"Do you really value yourself so little?" Sensei's comment surprised him. What did a person say to that? He valued himself! Does he want an answer? I don't think I don't matter. Do I? Harry decided to go with the cautious route: he shrugged. "Ah." Sensei did not give more of an answer. "Look at me, Evan." Harry raised his eyes to meet those of his teacher. "You are more than you know. You are my student, and it is an honor to teach you. In time, you will be able to take care of yourself, of that I have no doubts." Sensei stood, came around the desk, and crouched down in front of Harry. "Until that time, please allow me to protect you." Sensei reached out and put his hands on Harry's shoulders. Harry dropped his eyes and shook his head.

"People who protect me end up dead." Harry told him.

"I have faced death before." Sensei said. "Allow me to help you until you can protect yourself. That's all I ask." Harry stared at him.

"You can't follow me around all the time." Sensei's lips twitched.

"By the time I am finished with you, you will think I do." Sensei warned him. "Will you put yourself into my hands, deshi?" Harry didn't know what the strange word meant. Sensei held out his hands in front

of Harry. Harry wondered what Sensei would teach him. They were already having private lessons. What more could Sensei offer? By the time I am finished with you, you will think I do. Harry pried both of his hands away from the arms of the chair. He reached out hesitantly, allowing Sensei time to move his hands if he decided he didn't want to teach Harry. Harry's hands rested for just a few seconds before Sensei tightened his own around them. "Good." Sensei had no need for further words. I am gaining teachers right and left. Sensei stood and pulled Harry to his feet. "Go. Rest." Sensei shooed him out the door.

"Yes, Sensei." Harry left and went to his room since he was excused from play practice that day. Two schedules of schoolwork, play practice, art club, and extra martial arts classes kept him busy. Therapy added to that kept Harry more occupied than he had ever been at Hogwarts. Well, that and his current plans for Voldemort.

He sat at his desk and put on the headphones Hermione had given him. He pushed the "play" button and Mozart started playing. Classical music had become his "study music." He seemed to work better while he was listening to it. More focused at any rate. Hermione had given him another CD that helped to calm him more than anything else while he was practicing his meditation. He finished his Muggle assignments quickly and pulled out his Mini-Messenger. "Lightsaber."

Hi, Skywalker. I had a busy first day of school. Let me tell you a few things, and then you can have your assignments. I had Potions and DADA today. Snape practically told us that we were the best and as such, expected nothing less than the best. Nothing exploded. He said that he demands all childish prejudices left at the door. The class was so different! It seems he uses the first five years as a test to see who actually wants to learn potions! Smart of him. Professor Snape asked me where you were. I shrugged and started to tear up. He mumbled something to the effect that you would show up just to spite him. He seemed unsettled that you had not shown by the end of class.

DADA was very different. Our new professor is William Zareh. He tested us today, and you could tell who was in DA last year and who

was not. (Don't worry, you're well ahead of the game.) He seemed surprised that some of us could produce a Patronus. Neville told him that you were responsible. Professor Zareh didn't bother looking for you, because no one answered for your name at role call. He said that he can't wait to meet you.

I sat with Ginny and Neville today at meals because Ron sat at the Protectors table with "Drake". Rona and Malfoy have given up their prefect status. There's an empty spot at the Protectors' table, and Neville says that there is an empty bed in their dorm for you. It seems that Dumbledore is expecting you to show at any second. There are some rumors about you. Some say you decided to turn Muggle. Others say you transferred. The debate is between Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, and America. Still others say you are in training.

I have a study group in just a minute, but I'll be back so we can talk. Your assignments:

DADA – Read chapter one in Primary Defense

Potions – Blood-Clotting Potion. Prepare for next potion – Wound-Binding Potion.

Essay: What is the difference between these two potions and how can one

be used in conjunction with the other? He set no length.

I'll be back!

Harry smiled and the message and pulled out his Defense book and opened it to the first chapter. It was a general chapter about defense and the different methods of defense. A quick glance at the title of chapter two told him that the next contained a history lesson. It looked like they did a practical lesson during class and read the theory at night. Harry smiled. That was a complete opposite of Umbridge. He read through his Potions material and finished his essay and was into another chapter of Of Wandless Magic when words appeared in his Mini-Messenger.

-Skywalker, you there?

-I'm here. I have dinner in ten minutes. I know you do, too.

-Yes, that's right. Did you get your assignments?

-I'm already done. Thanks for them, by the way. Mi, I have a question.

-Okay, what is it?

-What does "force of will" mean? Both the Occlumency book and Wandless magic books mention it, but I don't understand it.

-Hmm. I'm not quite sure. I'll ask around.

-Thanks. Oh, I need to go.

-Me too. Talk to you later.

Author's Note: What did you think?

Author's Note: Okay, I know it has been a long time, but I've been in the middle of Turn, a week of torture where I do nothing but clean. I was going to update before this, but somehow my arms were just too sore to do so. This chapter is a little longer than most, to make up for it. This hasn't been beta-ed, so please point out typos, !

Dear Professor Lupin,

I know that you asked me to call you Remus, and I have several times, but I am writing to you to ask an educational question, and I thought you might like the title again.

I was reading about some theory on wandless magic and mind magic. A phrase, "force of will", reminded me of your lecture on boggarts and I was wondering if force of mind and force of will is the same thing. Are they the same thing? If they are not, what is the difference?

I've asked other teachers, and all (including Professor McGonagall) looked at me like I was a bit mad...Any help you send would be greatly appreciated.

Your Student,

Hermione Granger

Hermione rolled up the parchment and tied it off to take to the Owlery later. If anyone could answer that question after the reaction of the Hogwarts faculty (besides Snape and Dumbledore) it would be her former Defense professor. She pulled her Transfiguration book towards her and sighed. The second day of school did seem an odd day to be asking such questions, but she had thought they'd be used to seeing her hard at work, regardless of how far they were into the term. "Hermione Granger?" Hermione looked up to see a first year student from Gryffindor standing at her elbow. Sophie Matthews.

"Yes, Sophie? Is there something you need?" Hermione knew that Sophie was a Muggle-born student like herself and that some of the pureblood students and half-blood students had told rather frightening tales of Voldemort on the train. Sophie shook her head so hard her

braid swirled around her face. Hermione smiled kindly at the girl and waited for the reason she had sought out Hermione in the library.

“No, I was asked to ask you to go to Professor McGonagall’s office.” Hermione nodded and gathered up her books and started to shove them into her book bag.

“Thank you, Sophie. I’ll go right now.” Sophie gave a bright smile and rushed away towards the library stacks. Hermione waved goodbye to Madame Pince, left her sanctuary and set her steps towards Professor McGonagall’s office. She had a fairly good idea of the topic for the meeting and she knew what she would have to do. Lie to people she respected. She nodded absently to Nearly Headless Nick and turned the corner.

She presented herself to the portrait, said her name and waited for entry. “Ah, Miss Granger! Come in, come in.” Professor Dumbledore was in McGonagall’s office. Hermione smiled in his general direction, immediately turning away to wrestle her already massive book bag through the doorframe. McGonagall motioned her to a seat, which Hermione took, her book bag safely through the door and placed at her side.

“You must be wondering why you’ve been asked here.” McGonagall said as she poured out tea for the three of them.

“Yes, Professor. Have I done something wrong?” Hermione relaxed when McGonagall shook her head.

“No, Miss Granger. You have done nothing wrong.” Dumbledore interrupted by scooting his chair closer to Hermione and turning into an affable grandfather just presented with his favorite granddaughter.

“We have just a few questions, Hermione. Is that all right?” Hermione looked between the two of them, carefully avoiding Dumbledore’s eyes, as Harry suggested, before nodding carefully to the room in general.

“Of course.” She almost gagged at the eagerness in her voice. What if she messed up? “What do you want to know?” She asked with a slight frown. This was a dangerous game she was playing and if she didn’t play it right, Harry would be found.

“You and Mr. Potter exchanged mail over the summer, correct?” Hermione tilted her head to the side.

“Yes...at first, anyway.” She told the professors. “Harry stopped writing to me after two letters or so.” Dumbledore frowned while McGonagall’s expression didn’t change. “His last letter said that he needed some time to sort things out on his own. He quit writing to me after that.” Dumbledore nodded and sat back a bit in his chair. McGonagall took up the questioning.

“Have you had any communication with him at all since then?” McGonagall asked. Hermione shook her head.

“No, he said that he would see me on the train on September first, just like we do every year.” Hermione looked at McGonagall. “I was hoping that his family made him miss the train, but I haven’t seen him here.” She studied her hands for a few seconds before raising tear-filled eyes to McGonagall. “He’s missing, isn’t he?” She asked quietly, as though she was afraid to hear the answer. She hid her face in her hands when the teachers did not answer her. “It’s all my fault! I told him to just be patient, that you would let him go to the Weasleys’ and we could all spend some time together, but he’s not here! He must think I’m a horrible person!” Hermione knew that she could not bring better tears up at this point and let herself go.

“Minerva, why don’t you take Miss Granger down to Poppy for a calming draught?” Dumbledore helped McGonagall hoisted the hysterical teenager from the chair and waited until he was alone before turning to the corner. “Well, Severus?” The Potions Master stepped out from under the invisibility cloak and glared at the older man while he folded the garment.

“If she ever finds out I was hiding out in her office to do some spying on one of her precious little lion cubs, I’ll spend the rest of my days as

a footstool.” Severus complained as he straightened his robes. Dumbledore only raised an eyebrow in a silent request for information. “Very well. Those were sincere tears, Headmaster. Granger seems to be genuinely concerned for Potter’s well-being. As for her reaction, she is emotionally involved with him somehow, though I will refrain from musing on the complexities of Gryffindor mating rituals.” Severus paused and shook his head. “I highly doubt that she knows where he is at the moment. Weasley is a more likely option. Try him, if you think his brain can take it.” Severus sneered. “If that is all, I have a potion about ready for the next ingredient.” Dumbledore turned to the window and waved the man away with a polite “thank you.”

Severus turned and left the office. He ducked into one of Salazar’s passageways and returned to his rooms. Draco Malfoy was seated at the table, diligently working on his homework assignments. Severus shrugged off his heavy outer robe and hung it on the hook just inside the door. “What did you think of Miss Granger, Draco?” Draco jerked and dragged his quill across his essay. He gave a colorful curse Severus knew he could only learn in Knockturn Alley and raised his wand to repair the damage. “Language, Draco.” Severus sank into his armchair and conjured a cup of tea.

“How did you know I was watching?” Draco asked as he put his wand away. Severus glanced at the empty space on the wall he was sure had up until recently held a mirror. The mirror was currently lying on the table beneath the empty spot, spell still active, showing the interior of McGonagall’s office.

“You left the spell up and you forgot to set the room to rights.” Severus explained as he gestured to the mirror. Draco scowled and flicked his wand, ending the spell and returning the mirror to its rightful place. “Your thoughts on Miss Granger?” He prompted.

“I think she knows something.” Draco told him as he put away his books. Severus motioned for him to continue. “I’ve used that crying trick with my mother far too many times to get what I wanted.” Draco told him with a slight hint of disgust. “The only reason she got away

with it now is that no one suspects her of doing anything like that.” Draco moved from the table and sat down next to his mentor.

“I agree. She must be aware of Dumbledore’s Legillimency skills, for she would not look him in the eye.” Severus stared into the fire for a few seconds before returning his attention to Draco. “What can you tell me?” He asked Draco. The boy shrugged and bit his lips.

“Not much to tell, really. The Protectors are the Protectors. Sworn to school and duty. Miss Granger has a bit more information. She is polite, ambitious in her studies, and eager to prove that she’s just as good as everyone else here.” Draco sank further into his seat. “I think everyone underestimates her.” He confided. Severus only nodded.

“That could be true.” He confirmed with a weary voice. “I trust that you know what you need to do.” Draco was already nodding before Severus finished his statement.

“I’ve already laid foundations in that direction. I’ll let you know whatever I find out from her.” He stopped and shrugged on his Hogwarts robe. “If she has kept something to herself, I’ll find it and let you know.” He shouldered his books and went to leave when he stopped in front of the door and turned to Severus with an astonished look. “I’ve just discovered something you can’t do!”

“Brat.” Severus told the boy. Draco smiled and left the room. He had a training session scheduled in Hermione’s handwriting.
End of September...

Harry had relaxed a bit since September 1st when no one had appeared to take him back to his school. Fawkes’ continuing visits seemed to reassure Harry that he was safely hidden, though why that was, Paul would never know. Paul stood at the window and looked out at his charge with no small amount of frustration. Every time he felt like he was making some progress with Harry, something would happen that made Paul feel like he did not know Harry at all. Harry had just left a session with him and Paul was ready to open the boy’s skull somehow and look inside. It had to be easier than chipping

away at the defenses like he was doing at the moment. Harry was so well-guarded that learning anything at all was taking longer than he would have liked. When the committee had asked him to take the case, he had been hoping to have Harry back home by Christmas. Now, it seemed like Harry was going to be staying for a much longer time. Paul returned to his desk and pulled out his tape recorder and notes from earlier. Paul had started the session asking about primary school and what Harry had liked about it. His answer had surprised Paul. Paul rewound the tape and played it.

“ ‘I liked being there. Seeing what other kids were like.’” Harry had told him. Paul listened to his own response about having a cousin. “‘Yeah, Dudley was there, too. We didn’t get along. And he made sure that no one else could get along with me, either.’” Harry had tried to change the subject to Zen, but Paul had stayed on the subject. He had asked Harry why Dudley had not allowed other children around Harry. “‘I don’t know. He’s Dudley. He did what he wanted.’” Harry had closed his mouth on the subject and refused to talk further about his cousin. Paul then asked about the aunt and uncle while Harry was younger. Harry’s response was less than encouraging. “‘They were there.’” Harry shrugged as though to say, “so what?”

“ ‘Did they help you with your homework?’” Paul winced at the sound of his own voice. He hated the way he sounded on machines.

“ ‘No. I didn’t need much help.’” Harry had played with his pillow for a few seconds before continuing. “‘I did really well.’”

“ ‘They must have been proud of you.’” Paul stared at the recorder as though it held the answers he was looking for.

“ ‘No, I was nothing special.’” Paul knew the way Harry had said that meant that Harry had been told that and believed it. Paul had wanted to continue along that line, but Harry interrupted. “‘Can we talk about something else?’” Paul had allowed it. Harry was obviously uncomfortable with the topic and did not like discussing his family. Paul pulled out the night nurses’ reports and frowned. Harry had stayed up through the night until two that morning, and he was the first on his floor to report for breakfast. True, last night was a

scheduled sleeping pill free night, but Harry knew that he was allowed to ask for one if he had any trouble sleeping or nightmares. The reports said that he had been caught reading several times until he turned in at two, and had declined both a sleeping pill and Paul.

Sensei Leonard had come to him that morning, worried about Harry and some scars that seemed to have manifested some two weeks before his visit that had not been there before. Sensei had said that he had thought that Harry would have told Paul, but it seemed that Harry had decided not to tell Paul, or anyone else, for that matter. Sensei said that even he had found out by a convenient accident. Paul turned his chair back to his window and stared at the sky. Why hadn't Harry told him? More important, how had the scars appeared, and did it have anything to do with Voldemort? A knock on his door startled him a few minutes later. "Come." The door opened to admit Harry's art teacher. "Mr. Watt? What can I do for you?" Please don't ask for answers about Harry. I'm looking for them myself. Paul gestured for the man to have a seat and turned off the recorder. Paul did not have much contact with this man and when he and the other managed to cross paths, the teacher could only rave about Harry's talent as an artist. The man looked uncomfortable and fumbled with the portfolio he held.

"Normally, I allow my students to discard their work at their discretion, but Evan's work is different. It shows more passion than I've seen in a long time. It's very real, very alive. I couldn't bear to see him continue to throw out wonderful work. I've been collecting what he rejected and holding it. I was looking through it just now, and I noticed a few things." He pulled out a sheaf of papers. "Just look through them, and tell me what you see." Paul took the drawings and paged through them. Some showed Harry and the Dursleys, others of Harry in a classroom, riding a broom, facing some weird people (Paul knew they were wizards, most likely Death Eaters from what Harry had described before) and Harry against a red-eyed man that looked a bit like a snake. That must have been Voldemort.

"He has an active imagination." Paul said as he held up a drawing of Harry facing a dragon. Surely he did not have to do that as a part of school examinations? How old was he in that image? Thirteen?

Fourteen? They would not do that to their students, would they? Dragons? Mr. Watt shook his head.

“That’s not what I meant.” He took the drawings back and looked through them, changing the order of a few of them. He handed them back to Paul. Paul took them back and shrugged when he didn’t understand what Mr. Watt wanted him to see. “There’s two of him in these pictures.” Mr. Watt was right. Some pictures had a rather young and tattered looking Harry while the others showed a different, world-weary young man. There were no Harry’s in between. “I have one more that I think you should see.” Mr. Watt removed a rolled up paper from the portfolio and handed it to Paul.

“What is this?” Paul asked in wonder. He had never seen anything so intricate by such a young student. Harry said that he had only started drawing when he came to St. Jude’s. Had the same person managed this drawing?

“Something I found pitched into the waste-basket just yesterday.” Paul moved his eyes back to the image. The main image was a crystal ball with something written around it. Paul picked up his pen and scribbled the message on a scrap of paper. *Luos ruoy slaever that llab latsyrc eht.* Paul held up the image to the mirror and smiled. The crystal ball that reveals your soul. The ball itself had many cracks through it, although it still retained its ball shape. Inside each fragment was a different version of Harry. One was a huddled ball in a cupboard of some kind. Another was on a broom. One was facing Voldemort in a graveyard. Another was a wide-eyed child surrounded by people in a crowded pub. One had a bleeding scar. Two images caught Paul’s eye. Harry was leaning against the wall, bloody lashes showing through his torn shirt. That explained Sensei’s visit. The other image was Harry with slightly Voldemort-like characteristics. “What does it mean?” Mr. Watt asked. Paul did not look up from the picture.

“It could mean almost anything. It might be a work of imagination, or something more.” The man would have to be satisfied with that explanation. Paul could not explain further, not without allowing

something about Harry to slip out. Paul could not do that to his patient. "May I keep this for a while?"

"Certainly. As long as I get it back. It's beautiful, even if a trifle disturbing." Paul nodded and smiled. Only an artist could say something was beautiful and disturbing. Mr. Watt stood to leave. "Do you ever think that boy comes from a different place?" He asked with a little question in his eyes.

"Every once in a while, but then he reminds me that he is a normal kid." Mr. Watt smiled and left. Paul turned back to the picture and studied it. There were different and conflicting images of Harry. One made Paul look at it and study it for a long while. It was Harry, in battle-armour reminiscent of the Middle Ages. He had an odd look in his eyes, a sword clutched in his hand, and a determined air about him. His scar was bleeding and he was pressing his other hand to his side as if trying to hide a serious wound. Which of the images was the real Harry?

-I miss your visits, Mi. Just knowing that you were there.

-I miss visiting. You hanging in there?

-I guess. Paul's a bit frustrated with me, but I don't know why.

-What makes you say that?

-I...huh. He wanted to talk about the Dursleys and I didn't want to.

-How do you know he's frustrated?

-shrug No idea. I just do.

-How's force of will coming?

-Fine. Who knew it was that simple?

-That's what Professor Lupin said. It was simple once you got it, but you had to get it first. Force of will and force of mind are

interconnected. If you can manage a Patronus the way you do, I guessed you could handle really demanding that something happen. How's Occlumency coming now?

-Not quite there. It's like I'm blocked.

-You're blocking yourself. Open your mind to the infinite, clear it, and shield.

-I suppose you've already managed to do it?

-Mm, yes. I don't have a psycho with a link to my mind though. Are you angry with me?

-No. Now you can couch me.

-It is a lot like meditation, just faster, or more intense. You just need to speed up the steps.

-I'll give it a try. How's everyone at school?

-Well, the first years were hoping to meet you and every one is disappointed that you are not here. There is one, a Muggle-born who is having some trouble adjusting. Her name is Sophie Matthews. The others in her year keep telling her that Voldemort will kill her first. Malfoy, oh, excuse me, Drake, stays far away from the Slytherins. Neville says that when he is not with Professor Snape, he is in the Protector dorm, just like Ron. Ron seems to have forgotten that he has another house. All he talks about is becoming an Auror and saving the world. Did he always have such an ego?

-Once in a while. Though I don't think it was this bad before.

-Oh, well. I try my best to avoid him. Most of the other students do, too. Um, Neville and Luna are dating.

-What? That's great!

-Yes. They do seem suited to each other, don't they? Ginny keeps trying to hex Ron. I don't stop her. Dumbledore has asked me to

“inform” him should I hear from you. He has every magical government the world over looking for you, and I’m sure Voldemort knows you’re not at Hogwarts by now.

-Too bad I’m in the Muggle world.

-Harry, how do you feel like being a Slytherin?

-What?

-I had a thought. Misdirection. We need to keep everyone thinking that you want to be here. I’ve had my ear to the ground (or next to Ron’s boasting, you pick), and I’ve found that Dumbledore thinks you’re trying to come here. What if we set up a story that you do manage to get away from your school, but get caught and taken back?

-How would that help?

-It would let Dumbledore think that you are still his student, and safe from Voldemort’s evil influence.

-Um, Mi? I would never go to Voldemort.

-One of the rumors that the other students are passing around says that you have.

-I can never win, can I?

-Guess not.

-After Voldemort is dead, I’m turning Muggle.

-I wouldn’t blame you. You could watch Star Wars when ever you wanted.

-There is that. So, how would this plan work? I would have to be in a Muggle school, because there I would have no way to send an owl or contact anyone, and I can’t exactly pull out my wand. It would have to be a boarding school.

-Oh, Skywalker! It's perfect! I know just the place!

-?

-St. Ignatius! It's a Jesuit boarding school for boys. My dad's best friend from school became a Jesuit and teaches there. It's here in England, but Dad says it's a strict place. If your aunt told them to watch you, they would!

-Okay, so I'm an unwilling student at this Jesuit boarding school. Mi, what's a Jesuit?

-A type of Catholic priest. I'll ask my dad to send you the book I have on Jesuits. Some of their lives are really interesting.

-Not another book! I'm already swamped with work.

-You'll need it. If Dumbledore finds you and you tell him that story, then you'll need to know something of the Jesuits. Trust me.

-Okay. So, how does the story get out?

-You can send a letter to my house, because it's in the Muggle world. Just keep the messages vague, because "they" are checking mail. Send it to my parents and they'll make sure I get it.

-Sounds good. How about I draft one now?

-Go ahead.

-Dear Hermione,

I'm finally allowed to write to you! Sorry I missed you, but my aunt thought that this school was better for me. I'm not allowed to tell you where I am for security reasons. You already know why.

The teachers here are very patient with me and are tutoring me to get me to form level. It's a very secluded school and the grounds are beautiful. I have a lot of time to think. Oh, there's the bell. I need to

get to lunch. Say hi to the old crowd for me.

Miss you all!

Evan H. P. Smith

-How's that?

-Is someone reading over your shoulder, because that is perfect! It sounds like a call for help. Nice name change.

-Thought it was appropriate. I'll send it out tonight.

-Sounds good. I'll write them in two days and tell them to forward it.

-Great. Ugh. Sore.

-Sensei again?

-YES! Everything hurts. I spend an hour with him every morning, and two hours on Saturday. I also attend the daily classes with everyone else. Add both of my school assignments, classes, art club, play practice, tutoring sessions, and therapy. How did you survive third year?

-I had a Time-Turner. You need to drop something, Skywalker.

-I can't! If I don't keep up with the Hogwarts' assignments...

-I wasn't talking about that! How many martial arts classes do you need?

-I don't want to disappoint Sensei.

-How much do you learn in the regular, daily classes?

-Not much. I'm a bit ahead of everyone else.

-My point exactly. That would free up how much time?

-Um, about two hours or so.

-So, talk to Paul and have him rearrange your schedule.

-That's a good idea. I didn't know how much longer I could last.

-Good ideas are what I'm here for. Go talk to him now. I'll chat with you later.

-Okay. Mi? How's Snape?

-Prancing about like Christmas came early and he received an entire basilisk under the tree.

-There's one in the Chamber of Secrets. It's dead.

-Ew! Go talk to Paul.

-Going, Mi.

Harry reached out and knocked on Paul's door. "Hang on a second." He heard Paul's voice say. "Come in!" Harry opened the door and poked his head in. Paul waved into the room with one hand while he held the phone to his ear with the other. "That sounds great, Joe. Uh-huh. I'll see you Saturday. Uh-huh. Bye." Paul hung up the phone, scribbled something down, and turned to Harry with a smile. "Hey, buddy. What's up?"

"Um, I was wondering if I could talk to you about something." Harry said as he sat down on the couch. Paul gave him another smile. Harry had come to him! He wanted to dance a little, but was afraid of scaring Harry away. He put in a fresh tape and hit the record button.

"You know that you can. What's up?" He asked.

"Well, you know what my schedule is like, and I've been trying to keep up with my Hogwarts work through Hermione, but between the two workloads, and classes, play practice, art club, meals, two

lessons a day with Sensei, and then again on Saturday..." Paul held up a hand to stop Harry.

"Are you trying to say that you have too much to do and need to change your schedule?" Paul asked. Harry smiled and nodded a bit. "We can do that."

"That's great." Harry said as he leaned back on the couch. He picked up his pillow and sighed.

"What would you like to drop?" Paul asked as he pulled out Harry's schedule and picked up his pen.

"The regular martial arts lessons. I'm already ahead in them and I'm not learning much." Paul nodded and crossed out the lessons. Paul tossed down the pen and turned to Harry.

"I'm glad you came to me, Harry." He told the boy. "This is what we've been talking about, isn't it?" Harry nodded, giving him a sheepish smile. Paul knew that Harry was uncomfortable talking about or acknowledging when he did something Paul had asked him to try. "There was something I wanted to talk to you about, too. You saw me on the phone earlier. That was Joe and your Aunt Petunia, not necessarily in that order. They're ready for this Saturday. Are you?" Harry studied his feet and toed the floor.

"You're going to be there, right?" He asked as he looked back up at Paul. Paul smiled and reached out to hold Harry's shoulder.

"Right there the entire time." Paul smiled and pushed back to his desk. Harry relaxed on the couch. "I like that look on you. 'Relaxed teenager'. You should do that more often." Paul told him.

" 'Relaxed teenager?'" Harry asked. "Me?" He shrugged and closed his eyes. "I want to relax for the rest of my life once Voldemort is dead." Harry missed the look Paul gave him and sighed. "I was thinking the States. I don't think anyone knows me there."

"You want to leave home?" Harry shrugged again.

“I’m just thinking about it. I’m not really sure.” A flash of flames announced their visitor. “Fawkes!” Harry held up his arm and allowed the phoenix to land on it. “How are you?” The bird gave a magical trill and held out his leg towards Harry. “What’s this?” Harry reached out and untied the parchment wrapped around the leg. “Is it from Dumbledore?” Harry unrolled the parchment and saw a familiar crest at the top.

The Most Ancient and Noble House of Black

Harry,

If you’re reading this, that means I’ve done something incredibly stupid and left you alone. I’m sorry. I never think. It’s my biggest fault. I admit it. I’m sorry I left you alone, kiddo.

Since you are not of legal age, Gringotts will wait a bit before contacting you to go over my will. This letter is just to give you a heads-up.

I’m leaving everything to you, Harry. The house, my vault, my motorcycle (your mum would have kittens...must be why I’m doing it.), my house elf (you can kill him if you want to, but I wouldn’t recommend it); you get everything. I know how much you’ll have and I want you to have FUN! Note the capital letters. Pranks, women, vacations, cars, dragons, Quidditch teams, Fudge’s job. Use your imagination. Just make sure it is fun. Don’t you dare give it all away! If charity is your thing, that’s okay, make some donations, but don’t give it all away. That’s one of my final wishes. I want you well-provided for if I can’t be there.

This paragraph is important, Harry, so please don’t skip it. I’ve named Remus Lupin (that’s right...Moony) your advisor and mentor. He can’t be your guardian, because of some prejudiced laws (stupid Ministry!), but he’ll now have the authority to do some really wicked things like sign permission slips for school, oversee your estate (yes, estate. You’ll learn about that later.), act as a legal representative, and so many other things that I’ll run out of parchment to list them all. The Powers that Be should have included some reading material about

advisors/mentors and how it all works. If they haven't, contact Moony or ask a teacher (not Snape). They'll know what to tell you. I don't want you to be alone. The Dursleys don't count. The arrangement between you and Moony can be as formal or informal as you want. You'll call the shots.

Please stay in contact with him, regardless of your decision. He is the last Marauder and he can be trusted. Take care of him.

I hope I had a good death; my only regret is leaving you. I can only hope this helps. I'm in a better place now, I'm sure, and I'm with your parents. There are two Marauders here and the afterlife will never be the same! Take care, have lots of fun (you'd better!) and stay safe. I'm so proud of you. Remember, I love you and I'll be with you in your heart.

Your Godfather,

Sirius Black

"Padfoot"

Harry looked up from the letter and smiled at Paul. Paul eyed him. "Harry, you okay?" Harry nodded and then shook his head.

"It's from Sirius, my godfather." He looked down at the paper again and laughed a bit. "He wants me to have fun. He wrote to say that, he, uh, left me everything." The letter fell from his hands as his hands opened and closed, as though searching for something to hold. Paul knew that gesture by now and moved next to him on the couch, pulling Harry to him as he sat down. Harry didn't cry, but seemed content to just sit there, holding onto something solid next to him. "I miss him." He told Paul.

"You will always miss him." Paul told him. "He is with you, as long as you remember him." Harry nodded.

"That's what he said about my parents." Paul smiled.

“He’s right. You’ll always have someone with you so long as you remember them.” Harry pulled away after a few more minutes.

“Thanks, Paul.” Paul only nodded. He knew what Harry meant with those words. “He told me that I need to have fun. He even mentioned Fudge’s job.” Paul tried to remember who Fudge was.

“The Minister?” He asked and stood up. He returned to his file where he kept all of his information on the different people Harry had mentioned in their sessions. He had needed to use it more than once to figure out who was who and what they meant to Harry.

“The one and incompetent. He didn’t tell anyone in the wizarding world that Voldemort was back. No one was prepared. Now, he’s scrambling to make up for it.” Paul sat back down and faced Harry.

“Sounds like you’re pretty upset about it.” Harry nodded. “Want to tell me why?” Paul let Harry think it over for a few minutes. It didn’t look like Harry was willing to talk.

“I’m the reason Voldemort’s back.” He told Paul. Harry pulled his legs to his chest and hugged them as he hid his face. “The whole Triwizard Tournament thing was a setup he made to get to me.” Harry said. Paul did not answer him, hoping that Harry would continue without a prompt. “He knew that I would somehow be near the trophy at the end. He expected me to win. I found out later that he had a spy in the school that was sort of helping me along, masquerading as my teacher. He took my blood and he came back. It’s my fault.”

“Did you hear what you just said?” Paul asked. Harry looked up from his knees.

“Of course I know what I just said.” Harry stood up and went over to Zen’s cage and gave a quick look to ask if he could remove Zen. Paul nodded to let him know that it was okay. Paul allowed the tape to record, hoping that he could someday decipher what Harry was saying to the snake. “I said that it was my fault.” Harry stood with his back to the window as he petted Zen. The snake seemed more than happy to curl around Harry’s wrist and rest his head on Harry’s chest.

“Before that. Here, let me play it back for you.” Paul rewound the tape and pushed the button. Paul allowed the tape to play and watched Harry.

“So?” Paul wanted to groan in frustration. He supposed that he had heard it because he was the listener.

“You kept saying ‘he’.” He made the setup, he expected you to win, he had a spy, he took your blood, he came back.” Paul waited for Harry to understand what he was trying to say. Harry raised an eyebrow. Oh, great. Harry missed it. “It’s his fault, because he did everything. It was nothing you did. Only him.” Harry dropped his eyes to Zen and started to stroke the snake’s head. Did he not understand, or was he too happy with the way things were, with him blaming himself?

“Zen says you’re right. That it was his fault. What about the blood of an enemy he needed to come back? If I hadn’t been there...” Paul shook his head.

“He did not need a specific enemy, did he? He could have used almost anyone. It all depends on how you define enemy. I could be that enemy now. Sensei, oh Voldemort definitely has an enemy there. Dumbledore, Snape, McGonagall, the kitten he kicked when he was a child, the bug he smashed, the cabbie he did not pay. Understand?” Harry nodded slowly as he reached up a hand to stroke Zen again.

“Zen is his enemy with that reasoning.” Paul nodded. Harry got his point.

“That’s right. Anyone could be his enemy. It all depends on definition.”

Author’s Note: Like? No like? Totally confused?

Author's Notes: You all had some pretty good questions, so I will answer a few.

Paul visiting Hogwarts: What an idea.

Does the Ministry know: Dumbledore has not told anyone outside the Order.

Can we trust Joe/Paul: No comment.

Ultimate weapon to defeat Voldemort: Not telling.

Draco practicing Hermione's writing: He doesn't. She had written out a schedule. I had thought that was clear, but it must not be. I'll go back and fix it later.

Snape: Has his own motivations. That's all I'm telling you.

Art class: It's supposed to be fun. Harry draws what he wants and his teacher is not complaining in the slightest. Use your imagination. What would you draw if you could?

Vernon and I talked while Harry and Dudley were napping today. We talked about how to keep Harry safe from the magical world. I've told him about my sister and how she and her husband died (Dumbledore left us that much). I don't want the same thing to happen to Lily's son. I can see her in his eyes and it makes me think that Lily is watching me.

Vernon thinks that if we raise him without a hint of magic around him, he will turn out to be a normal little boy. No talking about magic, no stories with magic in them, nothing to do with the "m" word. I can only wonder if this will work. Will it be possible to keep magic from coming out in him? Will he be just a normal little boy?

Dumbledore wrote that Harry will be famous when he "returns" to the wizarding world, when it is time for him to attend Hogwarts. How can an eleven year old child handle fame? That MAN spoke of my nephew having fans. I asked about protection for him, and he said that my home was protection enough. Huh. What am I supposed to

do if a bunch of wizards show up on my doorstep looking for him? Tell them to leave?

Vernon thinks that if we are strict with Harry, he will turn out normal. I can only hope he is right. Dudley is so very normal and I wish Harry will be as well. My husband, bless him, has said that we will need to act accordingly to show Harry what is normal and acceptable, and what is not. Once he has passed the age at which Dumbledore will find him completely normal and leave him with his family, we can then start to show appreciation for Harry's talents and accomplishments. Can I really wait ten long years before I show that I care about Harry's schoolwork, his personality, or his well-being? Can I stay strong enough to protect my nephew, now second son?

If God is listening, may He grant me the strength I need to see this through to the end.

Harry handed the journal over to Paul and Joe and drew his legs up to his chest. Petunia sat across from him. He put his head down on his knees and proceeded to ignore everyone in the room. Why did Paul want him to do this? He had only a year left until he could leave the Dursleys. Why would he want a relationship with any of them now? It was too late. He just wanted to be left alone.

Paul closed the journal and looked at Harry in his usual "Please Ignore the Human Ball" pose. "Harry, please un-ball." Harry looked up and lowered his legs. "His" pillow immediately appeared in his arms. Paul let it go. It was an accomplishment that Harry was willing to try a joint therapy session with his aunt. Hugging a pillow would not make a huge impact here. "Why don't we start with questions you might have about what your aunt wrote in the journal you just showed us?" Paul asked, pulling his chair closer to Harry. Harry's eyes widened and he froze. Huh. Deer in headlights. "You must have at least one question." Harry released his pillow and rubbed his hands on his pants legs, displaying his nerves for the other two participants.

"Why?" His eyes dropped to the floor and he refused to look up at his aunt. Paul motioned that it was Petunia's responsibility to answer.

“Many reasons.” She hedged. Joe nudged her to continue. “To keep you safe from the magical world, for one.” Harry’s head jerked up and he stared at Petunia in terror.

“He knows?” Harry demanded, pointing at Joe. “You told him?”

“Yes, I know all about it. Well, what your aunt has told me, at any rate.” Joe answered for Petunia. Harry buried his face in his hands and groaned. He sat for a few seconds before leaping up from the couch and heading for the window. He skirted around Petunia and Joe as though they were Death Eaters and stopped before the window.

“Here come the owls.” Harry muttered to himself, eyes scanning the sky for his expected deluge of avian postmasters.

“No owls have shown up at the house, in case you are wondering. I have a feeling that that Ministry does not monitor normal folks’ conversations.” Petunia told him. Harry ran his hands through his already messy hair (he had not bothered trying to comb it today. His aunt never thought he did anyway.) and sighed.

“Harry, please come back and sit down.” Paul asked. “If the Ministry does show up, I’ll educate them on patient/doctor confidentiality laws and how their precious little secrets will not leave our respective offices.” Harry turned to Paul with an eyebrow raised.

“Nice sarcasm.” He commented. He looked to the window again, shook his head, as though to dismiss the thoughts of owls, and returned to the couch.

“Thank you, Harry. Now, back to your question.” Harry picked up his pillow again and sighed.

“You were trying to protect me?” He asked, the disbelief evident in his voice. Petunia looked a little lost for a second before appearing to have rallied herself in her head before answering.

“I didn’t do a very good job of it, did I?” She asked, allowing a small smile to show. “I did not want you in the magical world. I still don’t, but if you insist on going back there after you leave here, I’ll wish you the best of luck and happiness.” Harry nodded and looked at her for the rest of her explanation. “Your headmaster came to use several times after his first letter to tell us of what to expect when you grew older. You were going to be famous. How was I supposed to prepare you for that?” She asked.

“Vernon and I decided to raise you as if we had never heard of the word ‘magic’. We were trying to make you normal.” She shrugged, a little helplessly, and looked at Joe. “It didn’t work.” Paul motioned for everyone to take a breath while Petunia pulled herself together.

“Any other questions?” Paul asked Harry. Harry shook his head. All of the mistreatment, the yelling, the ‘no questions’ policy, the degradation was done to protect him? It almost made sense if he used Dursley logic.

“Petunia, do you have a question for Harry?” Joe asked. Harry quickly thought of the ground rules. No shouting. Listen to what the other has to say. If you cannot answer a question or address a topic now, tell us and we will approach it at another time. Understand that patience is necessary. Tell us if you need to stop. She could not force him to tell her anything he didn’t want to tell her. Good.

“Is there anything you like about the nor- um, Muggle, world?” She asked. Harry stopped to think about it. What did he like about the Muggle world?

“I like movies.” He told her. He paused. There were other things he liked, right? “Karate lessons. Drawing?” Her smile encouraged him to go on. “Theater. I got a part in the school play here. I like that.”

“A part in the school play?” She asked. Harry nodded and Paul sat back as Harry dropped the pillow and opened up a bit about what was quickly becoming his obsession.

“Yeah, I get to play Edmund from King Lear.” He explained. “Joe’s been helping me with my lines.” Harry stopped there. No need to tell her more than she wanted to know. Petunia blinked and relaxed a bit.

“Do you like your part?” She asked. Harry nodded and pulled his school bag closer. The battered copy of King Lear appeared in his hand.

“He’s so ‘out of my way, world!’.” Harry explained. “He doesn’t let anything stop him to get what he wants.” Harry paged open his book to his favorite soliloquy. He paused and looked at Petunia to see if she wanted him to continue. She looked down at the book. “This line here ‘Wherefore should I/Stand in the plague of custom, and permit/The curiosity of nations to deprive me/For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines/Lag of a brother?’ It’s like he’s saying he doesn’t care about the rest of the world.” Harry’s eyes took on their particular bright light he usually had when he talked about his character. “He’s so brilliant.” Petunia gave him a smile and nodded. “I can’t wait until I act him out on stage.” He said that last part to himself than to her.

“When will that be?” She asked. Harry looked up at her, startled and seeming unsure of what to say.

“Beginning of November.” Paul answered.

Petunia sat back and eyed Paul. “Is this only for students, or are parents allowed as well?” She asked.

Harry stared at her for a few seconds before asking a whispered question. “You want to come?” Harry asked.

Petunia turned back to him and eyed him. She nodded and gave a small smile. “I would like to, if you don’t mind. I happen to be very fond of theater.” She explained. “It was one of the few things I enjoyed about school.”

“Will Uncle Vernon want to come?” Harry asked, unconsciously edging closer to Paul. He could handle Aunt Petunia watching him, but he didn’t think Vernon would be very respectful of the theater.

“I fear he would run everyone out of the theater with his snores. He can’t stand it, so I always go alone.” Petunia told him as she settled back in her chair.

“Paul, it’s not too late to get her a ticket, is it?” Harry asked.

“Not at all.” Paul told him as he sat up to put his notebook on the desk.

“Can she sit next to Hermione?” Harry had abandoned his pillow long ago and could barely sit still with excitement.

“I’m sure we can arrange something.” Paul assured him. He watched as Harry turned back to discussion with his aunt about Shakespeare. Joe raised an eyebrow and Paul nodded back to him. They would talk after Harry went to his next activity. A buzzer sounded from the corner. Harry looked at the buzzer with a fierce glare before standing. “Have fun at art, Harry.” Paul said.

“I will. Bye, Aunt Petunia. Bye, Joe.” Zen hissed a good-bye, which Harry answered with a wave. No need to scare Joe out of his wits.

“See you next week, Harry.” Harry disappeared out of the door and down the hallway.

“That seemed to go well.” Petunia said as Paul poured out a glass of water for her.

“No, it didn’t.” Paul explained as he handed out refreshments. “That was one of Harry’s fast ones.” He offered Joe the biscuits and ignored the caffeinated beverages in his mini-fridge. They would have to wait.

“Fast ones?” Petunia questioned. “What do you mean?”

“Harry was in survival mode.” Paul explained. “I’ve seen more of his survival mode than I have of the real Harry.” He motioned to Joe.

“The same with me. He opens up a little before he changes the topic, and he does it in such a way you never notice until after he’s off doing something else.” Joe told Petunia.

Petunia’s face fell. “I thought we were doing so well.” She told the two therapists. “I thought he actually understood.”

“Oh, he might.” Paul interrupted. “Remember, he was in survival mode.” Paul took a sip of his own drink and relaxed his shoulders. “He gathers information, hordes it, and then goes over it in his head before asking a few questions to come to his answers and understanding. Give him a few days. I’ll phone you if he asks me questions I’ll need you to answer.” Petunia nodded her understanding. “Oh, Joe. Nice bluff.”

Joe smiled and stretched. “Oh, I loved your little warning. ‘By the way, Joe, Harry has these cool magic powers.’ Very nice. I could barely cover my shock.” Joe’s dry comment cut through Paul.

“I can have Harry come back in here and talk to Zen for you , if you like. Zen will probably request a mouse.” Paul said in his most serious tone.

Joe’s face changed from smugness to trepidation. “You are serious?” He asked. Petunia nodded.

“My nephew is magical.” She told him as she finished her water. She handed the glass back to Paul. “Of the flying broomstick, magic wand, variety.” Petunia smiled at Joe while he processed the thought.

“Magic is real?” he asked, as though he was almost afraid to hear the answer.

“Yes, it is real.” Petunia told him.

“Bloody hell.” Paul smiled as Joe voiced his thoughts. He had felt the same way when Harry had told him about it. “Bloody hell.” Joe would be fine.

Harry left art class and started to head back to his room. His art teacher had begged for one of his drawings to be displayed and Harry had given in. After all, he thought he did a pretty good job of showing what a Hungarian Horntail looked like in real life. That is what he liked about art class. He could draw whatever he wanted, and no one looked at him strangely for it, whether it was a kitchen table or Voldemort himself. He was often praised for his imagination. He didn’t want to hurt his art teacher by telling him it was real. He looked up when he felt eyes on him.

“Come.” Sensei said with a small jerk of the head to indicate direction. That was what Harry liked about Sensei. He never led anywhere, but walked with you to the destination. Harry fell in step with Sensei and smiled when he realized that they were headed outside. He didn’t need to explain his pause just inside the doorway. Sensei understood his need for caution. Sensei led Harry over the walkways to the little wooded part in which he had attacked Harry with golf balls. Harry hoped that it wouldn’t happen again. He hadn’t done too well the last time. “Sit.” Sensei gestured to the ground under the tress. Harry sank to the ground and got himself comfortable. “Now, meditate.” Harry closed his eyes and walked through the steps Paul had taught him. “Breathe.” Oh, right.

Harry jumped when a hand fell on his shoulder. “Breathe.” It was Sensei. Harry felt Sensei move his thumb back and forth on his collar bone. That was...soothing. Harry had a feeling that if Sensei demanded for him to move, Harry would be unable to follow the order. “Relax.” Already there, Sensei. Harry couldn’t find the energy to tell the man verbally. Harry’s head fell down on his chest. This wasn’t supposed to happen, was it? Was this still meditation? “Don’t panic. Breathe slowly.” What was going on? “Focus on this.” What had Sensei done to him? “Just on this movement.” Harry found that he could not focus on anything else. It felt like all that was left of him was that spot Sensei was running his thumb over. He was vaguely aware of Sensei rearranging his body to lie down, but he couldn’t figure out

whether his back had been lowered first or his legs stretched out. "Just this." Harry wondered if Lockhart had taught Sensei the spell to make bones disappear, because he felt like his whole body had lost its bones. "Focus on this." Sensei continued talking to Harry, but Harry couldn't make it out. Something was happening in his head, but he wasn't sure what it was. He wanted to panic and fight his way back to coherency, but he was too relaxed to manage it. Wait a moment. He knew this. He was inside his head. He had cleared his mind!

Severus reared back from the dinner table, causing the entire staff of Hogwarts and a fair number of the students to stare at him. He quietly excused himself from the meal and the presence of his fellow teachers and left the Great Hall at a brisk walk. Once he passed the doors, he rushed to the dungeons at a near run. He slammed into his quarters and added so many wards to the door and walls that he doubted even Albus would be able to break through. He doused his fire and covered all the portraits. He wanted absolutely no one to find out what he was about to do. He discarded his heavy outer robe and folded his long frame into his favorite chair. He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and settled his breathing. He felt the spell he had set up long ago enact and a "room" sprung up around him. He could see Potter ahead of him and looking around his room. Snape stood from his sitting position and moved forward to confront the boy.

"Well done, Potter." He said in his most menacing voice. "It's about time." Potter whirled and his wand appeared in his hand.

"Snape." Professor Snape nodded and faced Harry. The boy was eyeing him with some kind of emotion in his eyes. Snape could not name what it was and Potter was not giving him any further clues. "Are you real?" Harry asked. Snape snorted at the question. "What I meant was are you a figment of my imagination, or are you really in my head?"

Snape wondered what had caused the question. Could Potter really have experienced such a thing? "If you have daydreams of me in any fashion, Potter, I'm going to be greatly disturbed." Snape's comment

earned a disgusted face from the boy. "I'm sure we're both relieved that that is not the case."

"Alright. You're completely real." Harry stopped and looked at the man. "Before you say anything else about why you're in my head, sir, I wanted to apologize for looking into your memories. It was extremely disrespectful on my part, especially since you were willing to teach me." Harry paused. "I questioned Remus and Sirius about it. I didn't tell anyone else." Snape raised an eyebrow. "Sirius wasn't too happy, but I got my point across." He held himself ready to deal with a verbal lashing, but only a whispered question came.

"And what was your point?" Severus stared the boy down. He knew a few things about this mental room thing that Potter did not and he planned to use them.

"That the way my father and Sirius treated you was no better than how my cousin and his gang treated me when I was younger." Harry said, watching Snape as he answered. "That age had nothing to do with decency."

Severus folded his arms and sighed. "I accept your apology." Harry relaxed at his statement. "I know for a fact that you are not lying."

"How?" Harry asked. Snape waved his wand and conjured two chairs and motioned for Harry to take one. Harry stared at the chair.

"It won't bite you, Potter." Snape told him as he sat in his own. "Sit down." Harry backed up a step.

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, sir, but could you tell me what you said to me at the beginning of my second year?" Harry asked, wand still at the ready. Snape gave him a look as though asking about Harry's sanity. "Please, Professor. Just humor me."

"I said that if I had been in charge of your punishment, you and Weasley would have been expelled for flying that car to school." Harry dropped into the chair happily and relaxed. Snape eyed the boy. "May I ask where that came from?" Snape asked.

“My own mind hasn’t been exactly reliable lately.” Harry told him. “I just needed to make sure you are who you say you are.” Harry pulled his legs up and sighed.

“The Dark Lord?” Snape asked. Harry shrugged. Snape decided to teach what he came here to teach and then leave as quickly as possible. “This, Potter, is your ‘mental room’. Here, you are in control of everything.”

Harry turned and looked at Snape. “How did you get here, sir?” Harry asked. Snape was a bit annoyed at being interrupted, but the explanation was a valid request.

“I made a pathway in your mind during one of our meetings. I knew I was failing right before we stopped. I figured I could use the pathway if you ever cleared your mind successfully.” Snape waited for the outburst he felt sure was coming.

“I don’t know whether I should be upset or grateful.” Harry told him. “Please continue, Professor.” Harry waited for more explanation. Could this be the answer to his prayers about learning and mastering Occlumency?

“This is the state you should be able to reach at a moment’s notice. I’m sure you’ve noticed by now that you don’t have random thoughts floating around in that head?” Snape had brought up a good point. There were no random thoughts. Harry was concentrating on only one thing at a time. This was great! “To practice this, make it a habit to clear your mind every other doorway, every five breaths, or something similar, so long as it is comfortable to you. Continue that exercise until clearing your mind becomes second nature to you. This should be like breathing to you, Potter.”

“Yes, sir.” Anything to keep Voldemort out of his head. He decided that every five breaths would be a good thing to use, because he could practice everywhere. Snape seemed satisfied.

“Now, Occlumency is very hard to define, but it is a selective method.” Severus paused. Potter did not look like he understood what he had meant. “It is letting your attacker see what he wants to see without giving any information away. Do you understand?” Potter’s face screwed up in concentration.

“I understand the concept. It’s like a slide show.” Whatever that may be. “Pictures on a screen, right?” Snape could not believe that the Gryffindor actually put it all together like that.

“That’s it exactly. Can you do it?” Snape asked and was disappointed to find Potter shaking his head a few seconds later.

“I understand the what, but not the how.” Harry explained.

Snape stood and banished the chair away. He motioned for Potter to stand and banished his chair as well. “I suppose the easiest way to help you learn this is to show you what I mean.” Snape walked a bit away from Potter and faced him. “Wand out, Potter.” Harry held up his wand. “Now, I want you to think of a topic, anything really, and concentrate solely on that. It helps if you close your eyes while you think of it.” Harry’s eyes fell shut and he tried to think of one that would not offend Snape. Wait a minute? What did this mean?

“I don’t want to invade your mind, sir.” Harry said as he opened his eyes.

“I’ll trust you to be discreet about what you see, Potter.” Wow. Professor Snape trusted him that much? “Of course, I’ll be controlling what you see. Remember that. You can see nothing I don’t want you to see.” Harry nodded. “Now, close your eyes and focus.” What did Harry want to see? “Do you have your topic?” Harry nodded. He knew exactly what he wanted to see. “Open your eyes, make eye contact, and say ‘Legillimens’.”

Harry raised his wand and focused on what he wanted to see. “Legillimens.” He was surprised at the lack of resistance he faced. Images started to appear in front of his eyes. A little red-haired girl with bright green eyes popped into his mind. She was dressed in

robes, obviously on the Hogwart's express and was smiling. She was in the Herbology greenhouses. She was working in the Potions classroom with wisps of smoke curling around her. She was twirling by herself in the hallways. She cheered on a Quidditch match. She studied in the library, her hair pushed back from her face as she leaned over a rather large book that would have made Hermione proud. She punched his father in the face. She accepted a flower from someone and smiled. He watched his mother grow up before his eyes. The last memory was a little surprising, but it was nice to see. He blinked and the contact was broken. "Thank you, sir." Snape only nodded. The last memory caught up to Harry. "You kissed my mum." Snape snorted.

"She kissed me, Potter." He eyed Harry. "I assume you're about to ask why." Snape said when he saw Harry's face.

"I was trying hard not to, but if you're offering an explanation..." Harry tried not to look too hopeful.

"That was our seventh year. She knew about my family forcing me to accept the Dark Mark. She convinced me to go to Dumbledore. She went with me for what she called 'moral support'. At the time, she was the only one who knew, besides the headmaster, of course, what side I was really on. She kissed me after the meeting and said thank you." Severus paused. "She was to me what Miss Granger is to you, after I stopped being what she called a 'pompous brat'." Ask nothing further Potter. I have nothing left to say. The gods had to be with him that evening, for Potter only nodded.

"Thank you for showing me, sir. It's nice to see her from a different perspective." Snape inclined his head in a short nod.

"Have any idea how to do it?" Harry focused his attention and nodded. He could do this. "Then do it." Harry took a deep breath and waited. Severus made eye contact and said the spell. Harry felt his professor enter his mind, but it didn't hurt this time. He smiled to himself as Snape started looking for one thing. Harry brought up harmless images of he and his friends being out during curfew, using swear words, and ordering banned joke items. "Well done, Potter. It

looks like you've finally gotten the hang of this." He wanted to add thank God but felt that the comment would undo the work he had done.

"Thank goodness." Never mind, Potter beat him to it.

"I'm leaving now. The pathway will close behind me. Now that you've managed it once, you'll be capable of it from here on out, so long as you practice. Do you think that you can manage that?" Snape raised an eyebrow.

"Anything to keep Voldemort out of my head. He's been such a nuisance." Harry told him with a smirk. Snape snorted and shook his head.

"Only you can refer to the Dark Lord as a nuisance. Have you forgotten that he wants to kill you?" Snape turned serious. This kind of flippant attitude could easily kill the boy.

"No, sir. It's kind of hard to forget something like that. He'll have to find me first." Harry told Snape. Snape raised an eyebrow and stalked forward to Harry. He reached out and plucked at the shirt Harry wore.

"A Muggle school, Potter?" Harry realized that Snape could easily tell Dumbledore where he was.

"Not my idea, sir." Harry refrained from begging the man to keep his secret. It was tempting, though. "Are you going to tell Dumbledore?" He asked. He could at least pack if Dumbledore was coming. Snape gave him a look that clearly asked if Harry was crazy.

"And risk telling him exactly how I found you? He would know that I had failed in teaching you Occlumency. How would I look then?" Harry's face broke out into a wide smile. Easy there, Severus. You're comforting Gryffindors. That's dangerous ground there. "Did you want me to tell him?" Snape asked, just to cover all his bases.

“Not really.” Harry answered. Snape growled that it was a yes or no question. “No, then. I don’t want you to tell him.” Snape gave a short nod and faded away.

Harry saw nothing but a white room surrounding him. Snape had said that he was in control of everything? This was going to be fun. He closed his eyes and waved his wand, much like Voldemort had done on several occasions. He opened them again to find a rather cozy room with a roaring fireplace. He wandered over to it and imagined a rather large and familiar looking pillow. It popped into view. He settled down onto it and stared into the flames for a few minutes. He had a rather intriguing idea and he couldn’t wait to see if it would work. He just needed to find the perfect time to do it.

Snape opened his eyes, surprised to see that he had been “gone” for almost three hours. He smiled to himself, snorted, and fought down the mirth that threatened to ruin his reputation. He snorted again, unable to keep it back. He threw himself backwards in the chair and laughed. Oh, the irony of it all! Potter, Gryffindor’s Golden Boy, wanted to attend a Muggle school! Snape indulged himself in laughter for a long while. When he trickled down to chuckles, he could hear several people on the other side of his door, asking if he was alright. He locked away the chuckles and cleared his mind as he went to the door. He opened it to find Minerva, Albus, and Mad-Eye on the other side.

“My dear boy, are you alright?” Snape struck his most intimidating pose and sneered.

“Is a grown man not allowed some time alone?” he asked, feeling the laughter just below the surface. Potter didn’t want to come back to Hogwarts!

“Your actions at dinner frightened us. We thought something was wrong.” McGonagall explained. Severus rolled his eyes.

“I’m not a first year, Minerva.” He snapped, feeling just the slightest bit of irritation. Oh, wait. Potter was one of her students, and Snape knew that one of her students didn’t want to come back to Hogwarts.

“That’s what Potter used to say.” Mad-Eye commented. Snape snorted at the name. McGonagall bristled at what she thought was an insult to one of her students. A sixteen year old was managing to hide from an entire adult Order of wizards, and no one knew where he was. Except Snape. There was justice in the world. Mad-eye’s magical eye rolled over to stare at Severus. Snape glared at him.

“Well, you and Harry are both fiercely independent.” Dumbledore said, trying to peer around him into Snape’s rooms. Snape let out a short bark of laughter before resuming his normal façade of irascible Potions Master. “Are you feeling alright, Severus?”

“Yes, of course, Headmaster.” Snape answered. The headmaster thought that Potter was trying to return to Hogwarts! Severus started laughing and would have fallen if he had not grabbed the doorjamb on his way down.

“Albus, he’s ill! He needs to go to the Hospital Wing!” McGonagall’s wand appeared in her hand, only to be stopped by Mad-Eye’s comment.

“He’s lost it.” Moody said, sounding as though he was an authority on the subject. Dumbledore shook his head.

“He’s happy, so lets leave him to it.” Dumbledore shooed both teachers away before turning back to Severus. “Come and see me in my office tomorrow morning, Severus.”

“ Certainly, Headmaster.” He said in a serious voice before descending into laughter again. Dumbledore smiled, wondering why Severus was so happy. That needed to happen again. Severus did not have enough joy in his life, although that had gotten better since Draco had become a permanent part of his life. Whatever had happened to put the man in such a good mood needed to happen more often.

Hermione hummed to herself as she went down the stairs towards the library. Remus Lupin had come through in several ways and had recommended a few good books to Hermione for independent study,

which Hermione then ordered from Mr. Arcane in Diagon Alley. She had copied the books and sent them to Harry via her parents. Everything was working out the way she had hoped. Harry was getting better, slowly, but he was getting there. Remus was her confidant about studies, and Ron was leaving her alone after she had snapped at him about how some things, like homework, were more important than listening to the various school rules over and over again in case of an attack.

She couldn't understand Ron. Sure, he was something none of his brother's had managed, but why did he have to turn so, well, annoying about it? She avoided him now by hiding out in the library and joining any group of people that happened to be near her should he appear. He loved his new power and she often found him scaring the first years with stories (some of them exaggerated, some of them not) about Death Eaters and Voldemort and the horrors they did to small children. Ron had had only one encounter with them and he had turned it into a dozen...for the good of the school. If Hermione heard that phrase cross his lips one more time today, she was going to hex him into next week! "It's for the good of the school, Hermione. They need to be prepared!" Ron had told her last time she had scolded him for frightening the first years. He hadn't been the one to stay up with Sophie Matthews, trying to get her calmed down enough to sleep, and the nightmares afterwards! Hermione was so lost in her thoughts that she did not see the other two people in the hallway until they had grabbed her and pulled her into an empty classroom.

Wards and locking charms immediately went up while Hermione found her balance again. She whirled to face her attackers, hexes springing to mind (several of which Harry had taught her) when she realized who had pushed her into the room. "Neville?" Neville gave her a sheepish smile and nodded. "What is this about?" Luna finished her charm work and came over to Hermione with a small smile.

"Sorry about that, Hermione. This is about..." Luna held up a hand, waved her wand, and then returned her attention to Hermione. "Sorry. I didn't want anyone else listening in. We want to know how Harry is doing." Hermione raised an eyebrow and started to prepare her "I miss him so much!" phrases. "We already know that you know where

he is, and that you are in daily communication with him.” Hermione stared at Luna.

“How?” Hermione asked. This issue needed to be addressed immediately. She would need to be more careful in the future, especially if Luna noticed.

“You carry a Mini-Messenger. My father invented them two years ago for our reporters to use to send stories back no matter how far away they were. Mini-Messengers always do better in pairs. You write in it everyday. No one writes to their parents that much, and your parents don’t have a wand, which they need to work one, at least the first time around.” Luna explained in her dreamy voice. Hermione stared at her. Who knew that Luna could be that observant?

“You seem to know something everyone else doesn’t, but you hide it well.” Neville told Hermione as she sank into a seat. “We don’t want to know where he is. I guessed that if he felt he needed to be somewhere else that was his right to do so. Just, how is he?” Hermione considered actually telling them. Luna and Neville were two of the Protectors, that was true, but they were also original members of the D.A.

“I don’t know if I can trust you.” Hermione told them. Neville sat in a seat next to her and sighed.

“Did you know every Protector takes a vow when they become a Protector?” Neville asked. Hermione shook her head. No, she hadn’t known that. “They do. Ours was a little different. We swore to help protect Harry Potter. He was named. If he is safe where he is and wants to stay there, I would be breaking my vow to protect him.” Hermione looked between the two of them for a few seconds. She bit her bottom lip and shook her head.

“Hang on.” She went on the other side of the room and whispered the password for her Mini-Messenger.

Skywalker, you there?

I'm here. What's up?

Neville and Luna just cornered me. Luna's father invented the Mini-Messengers and she put two and two together to come up with Harry Potter's spy in Hogwarts. Amazing, huh?

I am deeply impressed. Now what?

They, she and Neville, said that they don't want to know where you are, but how you are. Can I tell them that?

I won't mind if you say how I am. Just no real details, please. Me being in a Muggle school is one thing, but a Muggle mental institution?

I know, you're the Boy-Who-Lived. Blah, blah, blah. When are you going to stop thinking of yourself that way?

Who says I do? It's everyone else in the wizarding world, aside from most of my friends, that is. Go ahead and tell them how I am. Could you tell them that I say "hi"?

Sure thing, Skywalker.

Hermione closed the book and faced Neville and Luna again. "Harry says hi. He also said that he is fine and that he is safe." Neville stood from the desk.

"That's all we wanted to know. Thanks, Hermione." Luna pulled Neville towards the door. Hermione cleared her throat.

"Could you not tell anyone that I'm in contact with him?" She asked.

"In contact with who?" Luna asked. Neville smiled at Hermione as the pair disappeared out the door. Hermione stared after them for a few seconds before pulling herself together and leaving the room. She still had to visit the library. She went around the corner to find

Ron talking to a bunch of first years about the dangers of Death Eaters. This was a perfect way to blow off steam.

“Ronald Weasley! I warned you!” She was happy to note that Ron actually looked frightened as she descended on him.

Author's Note: Okay, this chapter is the last one for the next two weeks (I'm back in school now.) I'll see you all then! Thanks for reading, as always.

Author's Note: I made it! I made it through the first few weeks of school! Yay! I had a financial aid scare (any American college student will know of this), had two (TWO!) family crisis, and had to study between all of that. Yes, this semester has been horrible so far, but it can only go up from here, right? That being said, here is the un-betaed version. I didn't want anyone to wait any longer than they already have!

Harry knocked on the door to Sensei's office and entered when Sensei called for him to do so. His teacher was seated by the window, watching the rain fall on the grounds outside. "Come, deshi. Come watch the rain." Harry carried a chair over to the window and sat beside Sensei. Harry relaxed into the soft chair and watched the rain fall onto the window. "You have a question?" Sensei's voice broke the silence.

"How did you do that yesterday?" Harry asked, referring to the impromptu Occlumency lesson. Sensei did not answer right away. "How did you know?"

Sensei reached out a hand and laid it on Harry's shoulder. "How did I know?" Sensei repeated the question back to Harry. Harry nodded and motioned for the man to go on. "I just did. It was the same way I knew that someone threatens your life, that he has somehow gotten to you here, and you never told anyone about it." Harry hung his head. He wanted to tell Sensei the truth, but was afraid to test his luck too much in the Muggle world.

"He wasn't here." Harry told Sensei as he turned to look at the window again. He always found it easier to look at something else when trying to explain something. "He attacked me up here." Harry reached up a hand to tap his head.

Sensei startled him by grabbing that hand and turning it to him. "I will not tell lies." Sensei read off Harry's hand. "What is this?" Sensei seemed very upset about this. "Did he do this to you?"

Harry tried to pull his hand back, but Sensei held onto it. "No." Sensei released Harry's hand and stared at Harry. "It was some barmy

teacher at school. She's been dealt with already." Harry pushed back the memories of Umbridge's detentions and prayed that she had been dealt with in the harshest manner possible. He wanted nothing more for her to have to use her own blood quill and experience what she put her students through.

"Do not let such thoughts fester." Sensei's voice cut through Harry's vengeful thoughts. "Such thoughts are not important." Sensei turned back to the window. "He attacked you through your mind." It was not a question.

"You must think I'm crazy." Harry said, shrugging.

"Crazy? I have been called crazy many times." Harry turned his gaze back to his teacher. "All a matter of perception. Some consider teaching children defense 'crazy'. Others call inventors 'crazy'. Still others know that 'craziness' is for only those people who see aliens in their televisions. Who am I, to define craziness? Eh?" Sensei laughed at his own joke. "They say, a fine line there is between genius and insanity. Perhaps we are both unknown geniuses?" Harry liked the idea and agreed with him. Harry had endured being called attention seeking, mentally unbalanced, and a spoiled brat. If someone wanted to gift him with a genius/insanity level, he would gladly take it over "attention seeking" any day. "Did I help to keep him from your mind?" Sensei asked.

"Yes, Sensei. More than you can know." Sensei nodded, obviously pleased at Harry's answer. He motioned back to the window. Harry returned his attention to the storm outside.

"Water always falls. Carries with it our hopes and dreams, and never once does it return them." Sensei's soft voice carried an eerie feeling to Harry's ears. "Once it cycles through the earth, to the river, to the air and back down, it often brings us something more than our hopes and dreams." Harry nodded, but unsure as to why he was nodding. "No shape does it have. No container may hold it. No dam stop it forever. Mountains disappear, valleys appear, and a home wiped away like dust." Sensei trailed his hand over the window sill.

“Psht, just like that. Strong, but weak. Easily poured, but never truly contained. Flexible, but stubborn.”

Sensei jumped to his feet and pulled Harry to his own. “Go, change.” Harry let the thunder roll over him as he left to change for his workout with Sensei. Something had just happened, but he could not figure out what.

Sensei was meditating when Harry entered the floor. Sensei did not move, so Harry sat down to join him. He cleared his mind on the fifth breath, as he had been doing since the day before. He was brought out of it suddenly when Sensei literally jumped him. “Don’t stare at me! Fight back!” Sensei barked at Harry. He could only stare at his teacher in shock. What was he doing? He scrambled out from under his teacher and fought to get up. Harry was a little worried. Neither one had any protective equipment. They could easily be hurt. Sensei was not giving him any time to voice objections. He attacked again the second Harry had gained his feet. Harry had to wonder who had possessed his teacher, because Sensei was starting to scare him. The man kept pushing him backwards, blocking all of Harry’s attempts to go on the offensive.

Harry fell over some mats along the wall he was using to guard his back. “Know your surroundings.” Sensei told him. Harry was less worried about his surroundings and more worried about trying to keep his hands blocking Sensei’s hands and his feet against Sensei’s feet. He almost groaned aloud when Sensei somehow managed to speed up his attacks. “Attackers do not care if you trip. They will use it!” Harry could feel the usual sensation of panic settle into his bones. He could not afford to panic in this situation. Sensei drove him along the wall until Harry was in the corner, fighting to stay on his feet. Sensei was not just attacking Harry at this point, he was provoking him, almost taunting him to do...what? Sensei kicked Harry’s feet out from under him at same time he managed to pin Harry against the wall. Harry tried to get up as he fought against his teacher. “You will die in this position.” Sensei told him, pulling Harry up with one hand while drawing back the other.

Harry did not know how to explain what happened next. He had simply raised a hand to somehow protect his head when he felt

something push Sensei away from him. Harry pushed up from where he had fallen when Sensei had let go and hurried over to where Sensei lay on the floor. "Sensei?" Harry shook his teacher lightly by the shoulder. "Sensei?" he said fearfully. One thought ran through his head. I killed him! He sat back on his heels next to his teacher, wondering how he was going to explain this to the Ministry, and worse, Paul. Harry jumped when Sensei groaned. "Sensei?"

"I'm alright, deshi." The man pushed himself up to a sitting position. "Protection, you have." Sensei reached out a hand and placed it on Harry's head. "Do you know what you did?" Harry shook his head as he looked over Sensei for any injuries. He had an idea of what he did, but how did you explain accidental magic to a Muggle? Sensei got to his feet and pulled Harry to his own. "Sorry to scare you so. You needed to learn how to handle your fear more than anything else. Always afraid for others. You focus on too many things. Your focus should be on your opponent and your environment. Nothing else." Harry shuddered at the familiar words that Voldemort had said. He pushed them away into his "will never remember again" section of his mind.

Sensei went over to the bench and pulled Harry along. He nudged Harry onto the seat and prevented Harry from pulling his legs up. "Have you heard of ninja?" The word triggered a distant memory about some movie Dudley had seen with his gang. Harry shrugged. "There were many stories about them. Fantastic stories of supernatural powers. One, you just demonstrated. Perhaps there is a grain of truth in the stories?" Harry looked up at him, amazed that the man was taking this so well.

"You're not angry with me?" Harry asked. Sensei merely raised an eyebrow. "I could have hurt you!"

"I have been hurt before. Always survived before. I'm conscious, there is no blood, and bones are not broken. I think I'll remain alive." Harry could only stare at the man. "The important thing is: can you do it again?" Sensei asked. Harry shook his head.

“I’m afraid to try.” Harry told him.

“Afraid for others. You cannot hope to protect yourself if you do not allow others to make their own decisions. You will not kill me. Stand and try again.” Harry stared at the man in wonder. Was he mad? Well, their earlier conversation told Harry that Sensei did not care about madness, only the fine line he was so obviously toeing at the moment. “Now.” Harry rose to his feet and resigned himself to being sore later that day. He recalled everything he had read in his books about wandless magic and could only hope that he could duplicate what he had accidentally managed so that Sensei would remain unharmed. Harry fell into stance as Sensei attacked again. This was going to be a long day.

Harry walked down the hallway towards his room. He was sore and he wanted nothing more than to curl up on his bed and die. He wasn’t hurt enough to do more than grimace with each step. It was muscle soreness, deep muscle pain, pain that told him he had been pushed a little too fast and a little too far. That, or his wandless magic, which he had managed to do several times, just happened to drain his body of essential healing energy. He didn’t know which. “Hey, buddy. Ouch, you look like you hurt.” Paul said as he came up the hallway.

“I do.” Harry would have cried if he had been a few years younger. “I’ve got something I need to tell you.” Harry told Paul in a whisper. Paul nodded and led Harry to his office, walking slowly so that Harry could manage to keep up. Harry sank onto the couch and sighed. “Ow.” He complained.

“I can’t imagine what Sensei had you doing if you’re in enough pain to say ‘ow’.” Paul held out a water glass and a pain killer. Harry smiled his gratitude and took the medicine. He didn’t always like to rely on Muggle medicine (sleeping pills aside, which tasted so much better than Dreamless Sleep!), but he needed it now. “What were you doing?”

“Wandless magic.” Harry admitted. “Sensei doesn’t know that, of course. He just mentioned that there were stories of martial artists with powers like what I did...” Paul gave Harry a confused look.

“Sensei attacked me and told me to fight back. He pushed me into a corner and I panicked. I don’t know how I managed it, but my magic pushed him away from me. After that, Sensei wanted to see it again and again. I think that’s why I’m so sore now.”

Paul nodded. “No more wandless magic until you learn how to control it and what the dangers are, okay? If he asks, tell him to take it up with me.” Paul said. “I don’t want to see you in the infirmary with no way to explain why you so conveniently passed out or the like. The doctor will think you have food issues and place you on watch and...well, let’s just say that you don’t want that to happen.” Harry smiled at Paul’s expression and relaxed a bit.

“How long do these painkillers take to work?” He asked. Harry really hurt a lot, kind of what it felt like after the graveyard in his fourth year. He remembered wanting nothing more than to sleep for a year after that.

“You should be feeling it in just a few minutes.” Paul answered. He pulled out a sheet of paper. “Your aunt left this here for you yesterday. She said that you know this man, Remus Lupin? Isn’t that your advisor?” Harry nodded and took the sheet of paper.

“It’s his Muggle address. I can write to him now.” Harry looked at the address. “He’s actually really close to here, or I think he is.” Harry held it out to Paul for confirmation.

Paul glanced at the paper and nodded. “About a half hour away, I should say.” He pushed his chair over to the small refrigerator he kept in his office. “Juice? Coca-Cola?”

“Apple juice, please.” Harry let the man hover over him for a while. It seemed that Paul was worried and felt the only way he could convey his worries was through giving Harry a snack. Harry wasn’t about to complain. Food just tasted better here than it had at Hogwarts last year, if that was didn't stick in his returned with Harry’s juice and his favorite yogurt flavor (strawberry-banana). “Could Remus come here sometime and visit me?” Harry asked as he opened his juice.

“I’m not going to keep him from you if you want to see him, but if he does anything that looks like he will take you from here, I’ll step in.” Paul told him. It would be good for Harry to see someone older from the wizarding world, but that didn’t mean that Paul would let him walk over Harry’s right to make his own decisions.

“I don’t think Remus will do that. If he had been Sirius...well, I would have been at Hogwarts already. Remus is more down to earth than my godfather is.” Harry paused. “Was.” Paul reached out and laid a light hand on Harry’s shoulder. “I still miss him.” He whispered. “I’ve got this ache, right here.” Harry put a hand on his chest. “It feels like it’s never going to go away.”

“It’s okay, Harry. Give it some more time.” Paul said as he took the juice bottle from Harry’s shaking hands.

“It’s not fair.” Harry complained. “It’s just not fair.” Harry took a deep breath, held it, and let it out.

“Hey, no fair using calming techniques!” Paul objected. Harry smiled through blurry eyes at Paul. “You little nut.” Harry snorted.

“That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? Cause I’m a nut?” Harry joked.

Paul looked scandalized and rolled his eyes. “Super powerful wizard, the Boy Who Lived, saying he is a nut. What is the world coming to?”

“Voldemort ruling the world?” Harry asked. Paul tossed a pillow at his head which caused Harry to return fire. “Don’t throw it back! You’ll spill my yogurt.” Harry protected his yogurt cup from Paul’s impending attack.

“Cheater.” Paul grumbled good-naturedly from his chair. “You claimed yogurt status.” Harry snorted and finished his yogurt quickly. He tossed his cup in the garbage, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes. “I think you might want to consider telling Sensei about you being magical.” Harry opened one eye and stared at Paul.

“No way.” Harry shook his head and sat up. “I’m pushing my luck with you and Joe. I don’t want to risk anymore.”

“It’s up to you, of course. Just think about it, okay?” Harry stared at Paul before nodding.

“I’ll think about it.” Harry stood and grabbed his book bag. “I’ve got some homework to finish before dinner and play practice. I’ll write to Remus and let you know when he is coming.”

“Sounds good, buddy. You still want a sleeping pill tonight?” Paul asked as Harry straightened his book bag.

Harry paused and considered it. Did he want a sleeping pill? He had learned enough Occlumency to please Snape, of all people. He was able to manipulate his little “room”. Voldemort wouldn’t know what hit him when Harry revealed his shields. He was hoping Voldemort would be flattened like a bug on the windshield of the Knight Bus going at top speed. “No, I think I’m okay. I’ll ask for one if I need it though, okay?” He asked Paul.

“Sure, Harry.” Harry started to open the door when Paul stopped him. “Harry?” Harry turned back to Paul. “No more studying at night?” Harry shook his head. “Good. If you need more free time in the future, let me know. Two school schedules are tough.”

“I will, Paul. See you at dinner.” Harry ducked out the door and went back to his room. He had a Charms essay to figure out and needed to answer a few questions about the War of the Roses.

Remus was sitting in the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, ignoring the gloom around him as he worked on perfecting his “dottering old fool” persona. He found out a lot of information of the who’s who and what’s what of the Order by pretending to be asleep. Albus Dumbledore was not as omnipotent as everyone made him out to be. The old man still had no idea where Harry was and repeated visits to Privet Drive had only made the wards impassable to Dumbledore and McGonagall. Remus had had no problems when he had visited Petunia earlier that week for an update on Harry. The invitation to tea had been a surprise, but she had shown Remus a few pictures from

when Harry was younger and a few of his early school things she had kept. All of the pictures had been candid shots. Harry probably hadn't realized that the camera was on him at the time.

"The Spanish unit just reported that their target was nothing more than a false alarm." McGonagall's voice reached Remus's ear. "They will continue to search and let us know of the results." McGonagall bustled away at the end of the sentence.

"Headmaster?" Ah, Snape. Remus had never seen the man so...cheerful. He decided to blame it on Severus becoming a father in fact, even if it wasn't official. He practically beamed every time one of Draco's teachers complimented the boy. It was slightly nauseating to see. "What makes you think Potter is there?" Yes, Headmaster. Do tell.

"Whispers among the children, Severus. I have a feeling that Harry is in contact with one of them, at the very least. Several of his friends are Protectors. I'm hoping that one of them will come forward in time with his location." Dumbledore sounded weary. Remus wondered how much sleep the man had gotten recently. "I'm surprised that they have lasted this long without telling us. Each of them knows that the longer he is away from Hogwarts, the worse the danger grows." Snape made a non-committal noise. "What does Voldemort say?"

"The Dark Lord is gloating that the boy is missing, but not to the level he would be if he had Potter in his dungeons. I feel the Dark Lord is happy that you are just as clueless as to Potter's whereabouts as he is." Snape paused. "Unless this is some ploy you are using to train the boy into the ultimate fighter."

"You know me better than that, Severus." Remus smirked to himself. There were so many ways Snape could take that.

"Wolf!" Ah, someone finally noticed his presence. Remus jerked "awake" and blinked up at the pair.

“ Ah, Albus! Severus! Good evening. How are you both?”
Dumbledore gave Remus a benevolent smile.

“We’re just fine, Remus. Glad to see you up and about. Did you need an escort home?” Remus waved the offer away.

“No, no Albus. I manage just fine, thank you.” Remus got to his feet and leaned on his cane (carried purely for effect at this point). “Have you any news about Harry?” He asked, just as he did every time he saw Dumbledore.

“None yet, but we’re hopeful.” Same answer as the last time. Remus nodded and looked down at the ground.

“Yes. Let me know if I can be of any assistance.” Remus tottered through the doorway and into the hallway beyond.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone go downhill so fast.” Snape’s voice was just loud enough to reach Remus’ ears. Little did he know! Remus went to the living room, deserted at this time of day, and lit the fire to return home. He tossed in the Floo powder and stepped through to his house. He closed the connection (required by the Order as a necessary precaution) and was surprised to find Fawkes waiting for him.

“Fawkes! What are you doing here?” Fawkes chirped something and held out a foot. A scroll of parchment was wrapped around it. “Is this for me?” He undid the string and looked at the parchment. Familiar handwriting loomed up to meet his eyes.

To Remus Lupin, aka: Moony.

I didn’t listen to you, did I? That’s the only reason you are reading this now, delivered by my good friend, Fawkes. I don’t know what prompted this letter to you. I’m just writing it in case I die. If I do leave you alone because of my own stupidity (let’s face it. It’s the only way I could die at this point), I just want to say that I’m sorry. I hope that is sufficient apology for you, because you know how I am with all that sappy stuff.

Oh, Remus, all the pranks I have left un-played because you talked me out of them. I still think the kids at Hogwarts would have gotten a kick out of a pink-haired Snape. You spoiled my fun, you know. Oh, that's not important. I know you've put up with a lot from me, especially after the whole Azkaban thing. I'm writing to ask you to take care of Harry. He needs someone in his corner. I know you'll accept being his mentor and advisor (that's all I could pull, Moony. I tried to get custody papers, but it just didn't happen.). I'm writing this when Harry is fourteen, so I've set up eight years salary for you, to be transferred to your vault upon receipt of this letter. You can't fight it, Moony. You have until Harry is twenty-one to get that boy to have some fun! Oh, there's something about his estate as well, some stocks and shares in a company somewhere, my house, his house, and something else...oh it's all in my vault! I'm sure you can find it all there. The goblins should help you out. If you think you can handle it. Shouldn't be too hard for a man of your talents. That is your mission, Mr. Moony. I know you will not fail.

I've written to Harry and told him that he'll call the shots in this advisor/mentor thing, and how complicated the relationship will be. Expect a frequent house guest. The nice thing about this mentor thing for you is that those pesky werewolf laws just don't apply anymore. The only laws that apply to you are the normal wizarding laws for advisors. You've basically become a VIP for Harry's sake. The Ministry should be sending you some literature about it, but you should already know EVERYTHING about it, if I remember your school record correctly. I still don't see how you got so many OWLS and NEWTS.

That's all I really had to say. Take care of yourself, Moony. I'll be waiting for you, planning a few pranks and dodging Lily's fists because I've somehow managed to tick her off again. I know I'll see you again. It had better not be too soon. I expect a long life of fun for both you and Harry. Well, after the Dark Mold croaks, that is. Heck, have fun before hand. Maybe a prank will do in the Annoying One. (Not Snape, the other evil git!)

Sirius

“Padfoot”

Harry reached up and turned out his light, hoping that he knew what he was doing. He buried all of his doubts and thought positive thoughts. He was part Slytherin, right? He could think like a snake. Now, he just had to fool Voldemort – he must be insane. He lay down in his bed and cleared his mind of all emotions, locking each one down into his covered memories, only allowing unimportant memories to float to the surface. He calmed as he drifted into sleep and started dreaming.

“Good evening, Harry.” Voldemort’s voice cut through Harry’s dreams of Jedi. Harry opened his eyes and sat up to look at Voldemort.

“Hi.” Harry returned as he rubbed his face to rid himself of sleep. “Please give me a second.” Harry dodged as a spell headed towards his head. “Come on, I was polite!” He objected as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Good! You sensed it coming. That is lesson number one in practical application. How did you know?” Harry stared at the man. He must have wanted to be a teacher in a past life somewhere.

“I just did. I’m not sure how I did it.” Harry eyed Voldemort before looking down at his pajamas. “Could you help me out here, sir?” He asked, gesturing to his pajamas. Voldemort waved his wand and Harry watched as his clothing changed to something suitable for physical activity.

“So, you sensed a spell coming at you?” Voldemort asked.

“I felt it. How did I do that?” Harry looked to Voldemort for an answer.

“What is lesson number one?” Voldemort asked.

“I need to pay attention to my surroundings...oh!” Voldemort nodded as Harry figured out what he meant. “Paying attention to my surroundings will give me ways to fight my opponent, right?” Harry

fought back his shudder as Voldemort gave him a smile. Why in the world did he have to smile at Harry? Couldn't he just sneer, as usual?

"Very good. Now, spell-casting. Come here." Harry went over to stand next to the man. "Wand out." A target appeared about ten feet away from Harry. "A wizard can have a different amount of strength in spells depending on several factors. Any idea of what those might be?" Harry thought quickly.

"Physical fitness of the wizard. Magical levels. Ummm...emotional status?" Voldemort flicked his wand, making Harry flinch at the sting produced.

"You don't sound too sure. Explain your answer." Harry cast his thoughts to any power that was listening to somehow get him out of this mess he had managed to get himself into yet again. "Quickly."

"Well, if you're sick, your spells will be a little weaker than normal. Some wizards are naturally stronger than others. And the emotions, well, some spells just come out easier or better if there is a strong emotion behind them, such as the Riddikulus spell for fighting boggarts to the Cruciatus Curse, which needs intent behind the spell to work." Voldemort pondered the answers.

"Acceptable." Harry gave a small nod. "I want you to figure out your best way to boost your power. Only the standard Disarming spell." Harry turned and faced the target. He raised his wand and stared down the length of it. "What kind of stance is that?" Voldemort grabbed Harry's wrist and straightened his arm. "The legs need to be firmly apart, grounding you to the earth." Harry fixed his feet and held his arm as Voldemort instructed. "Now."

"Expelliarmus!" The target glowed green once hit.

"Fair. You have satisfactory levels. Do it again, except this time, go for the next level, orange." Harry fixed his stance again and stared down the target. He pulled up his feelings and focused all of that energy into his magic.

“Expelliarmus!” The target glowed between an orange and a green. Harry felt two quick stings across his back. That was not going to help him!

“Again!” Harry closed his eyes, focused and memorized the target in front of him.

“Expelliarmus!” The target gave a reddish-orange glow. Voldemort applauded behind him.

“Good! You can think after all.” Snape must have taught Voldemort how to compliment and insult someone at the same time. “Now, take it as high as you can get it. Go beyond red, if you can.” Harry nodded and looked at the target. A quick sting broke his concentration. “You’ll need to be quicker.” Voldemort told him. Harry ground his teeth and wondered if he really was insane for attempting this.

Harry turned to the target and lifted his wand. His back hurt, he was stressed from dealing with Voldemort, he was starting to regret his decision to do this, and he was tired. What else could go wrong? “Expelliarmus!” The target glowed a bright white. Harry lowered his wand in shock, wondering what that meant. White light?

Voldemort stood next to him without any words. Harry’s eyes slid towards him to figure out if he had done something right or wrong. He knew that it really didn’t matter how well he had done, because Voldemort would do whatever he wanted, regardless of Harry following instructions or not. “You did well. It’s time for you to return. Remember, you have power Dumbledore can only dream of.” Harry nodded as Voldemort said a sleeping charm and Harry faded away into his “room”.

Harry sat up in his mental room and smiled. Potter: 2 Voldemort: 0 Harry pulled himself off the floor and shrugged away his new scars as he applied a bit of wandless magic to his back to dull the pain. He only hoped that he wouldn’t become exhausted again. The Ministry had yet to show up to arrest him for magic in front of Muggles so he guessed that wandless magic couldn’t be tracked outside the wards on his aunt’s house. His plan for Voldemort was coming along nicely.

Now, he just had to figure out what to do next and hope that the Dark Lord wouldn't figure it out before Harry was ready.

Author's Note: Well, there you go. Let me know what you think.
Question for you all: Does Sensei know about Harry being a wizard?

Author's Note: I really did try to update last week, but I had so many papers due that I just couldn't write. Here's the next installment. I hope that you all enjoy this. As to your guesses about Sensei, some of you really hit the mark! I'm so proud. Lots of Remus in this chapter! Remus thanked the cabbie and left the cab as it stopped at the main doors of St. Jude's Academy. Harry had written to him, explaining where he was and why he was there with all the surliness of a teenager, and the hopefulness of a child missing a favored friend. Remus knew the tone Harry had used and had, in fact, seen the same kind of tone in letters Sirius had shared with him. Harry wanted to see him, but was afraid of being a burden to Remus. The werewolf smiled to himself as he opened the doors. As though Harry could be a burden! Technically, Remus was now employed by both the Black and Potter estates and as such, was to be at Harry's side the instant Harry needed him. Harry did not know that yet, but he would soon.

He opened the doors and looked around the entrance hall. It looked rather comfortable and welcoming, not at all intimidating, but he had to suppose that it was planned for just that effect. From what Harry had said, this was a Muggle mental hospital with classes offered. In other words, it was a Muggle boarding school with a few perks for those who needed them. Large windows to his left pulled him in that direction. It was the dining hall, and it was obviously lunch time for the residents. Remus searched the sea of faces for Harry's and found him sitting at a table with other boys near his age. They were listening intently to a boy near the middle of the table who was wearing a strange sort of hat. The entire table broke into laughter at something said, at which the boy stood, bowed, and resumed his seat to continue eating.

Harry looked relaxed, more than Remus had ever seen before. Harry was happy. A girl approached the table and stopped to speak to Harry. Remus hid his smile behind his hand as Harry froze in terror before relaxing into a smile for the girl's benefit. He answered her and she smiled and bounced away from the table to land at her own table to descend into giggling with her friends. Remus noticed that every boy at Harry's table, including Harry, had followed her movement across the room. Typical of teenage boys, really, but Harry was finally acting like one! Once the girl had taken her seat, the boys at Harry's

table turned and immediately started teasing Harry, which Harry had played off with a sheepish grin and an apparently witty comment that induced more laughter among his friends.

“Sir?” Remus turned to find a young woman approaching him. “May I help you, sir?” Remus gave her a warm smile.

“Yes, please. My name is Remus Lupin and I am here to see Evan James.” Remus used the name Harry had given him in his letter.

“Oh, yes. He’s been asking about you all morning!” She said with a good-natured grin. “Politely, but insistent. I told him I would let him know when you arrived, but he would still hover about my desk with those big eyes of his. If you would please wait in here,” She gestured to a door, “Dr. Lauter will meet with you and then you can see Evan.” Remus thanked her with a smile and set his case on a table and took a seat near it. Harry had explained the need for the alias, but it was going to be strange to call him by a different name when he had been Harry for so long.

He did not wait long. A man near his own age entered carrying a manila folder under his arm. “Mr. Lupin?” Remus stood and extended his hand. “My name is Paul Lauter; I’m Harry’s doctor.”

“You call him Harry?” Remus asked in confusion. Harry had told him he used an alias.

“Only in private. If we’re outside or in the halls, he’s ‘buddy’ or ‘kiddo’.” Paul explained to him. “Now, he asked me if you know how to shut maps. He said that would make sense to you.” Remus smiled and nodded.

“Of course. ‘Mischief managed.’” Paul smiled and nodded, as though coming to some kind of decision. He motioned Remus to a chair and took his own near him. The manila folder opened and Paul examined the page in front of him before raising his eyes to Remus.

“Harry mentioned that you are a werewolf?” Remus nodded affirmation. “That must be hard.”

“You adapt after a while, I’m afraid. It only happens once a month, so it’s nothing I can’t live with.” Remus explained. Paul nodded and marked something down.

“When did you meet Harry?” Paul asked. Remus smiled as the question took him back to the first time he had seen Harry as a baby. He had been a happy, burbling baby, full of mischief to keep Lily on her toes as she chased Harry through the living room. She had been livid when she had discovered James had bought a child’s broomstick and had removed all of the safety charms.

“I met him the day he was born. I was there.” Paul nodded. “I met him again when I became his Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in his third year at Hogwarts.” Remus explained to Paul. Harry had seemed so young then. Old, but young.

“How are you connected to him now? You’re his mentor, obviously, but how does that work?” Remus smiled. This Paul was intensely protective of Harry.

“I am literally Harry’s employee, but he doesn’t know that quite yet. I’m to look after his affairs, whether they are financial, legal, or personal. I can be his spokesperson at meeting he can’t or doesn’t want to attend or vote in elections he is unable to attend.” Paul stopped Remus by waving his hands.

“Wait, wait, wait. Are you telling me that Harry has a say in government in the magical world?”

Remus chuckled a little bit and shook his head. “Oh, no. Not yet, anyway. Not unless he runs for office. I don’t know how much Harry has told you beyond the fact that magic exists. I’m just listing all possible responsibilities I could have. I imagine that Harry will not have anything more complicated for me to do than making sure his bills are paid and helping him pick out suitable clothing when he’s of age.” Remus paused, as though searching for something to clarify the situation. “I am here to assist Harry in the best way I can. Try to think of me as a personal assistant with all kinds of extra privileges.”

Remus explained to Paul. Paul nodded and closed his file, his face growing dark as he did so.

“Will you reveal Harry’s location or remove him from my care before I deem him ready?” Paul demanded of the werewolf across from him.

“No. If Harry wants to leave, I’ll help him. If he wants to tell anyone about anything, I’ll help him. It is up to Harry. I won’t interfere unless I find out that Voldemort himself is on his way here.” Remus said calmly.

Paul sat back in wonder. “You said his name. You said ‘Voldemort’.” Paul received a rather blinding smile in return.

“You’ll find very few wizards willing to do that.” Paul’s eyes met Remus’ own for a second until they shifted to a view behind the werewolf.

“I think Harry is tired of waiting.” Harry was standing outside the door and dancing from one foot to the other. Paul stood and motioned for Harry to enter the room. Harry smiled and pulled the door open, but his smile faded as he saw Remus. He grew tense and Remus wondered why the change in demeanor. Harry stopped and looked at Paul. Paul nodded and smiled. Harry seemed to take this as some sort of signal. He approached Remus and stopped in front of the werewolf.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered. Remus could not figure out what that meant exactly. What in the world could the boy be sorry for? “I’m sorry...Sirius...I tried.” Remus understood then. He reached out and pulled Harry into his arms.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all. It wasn’t your fault.” Harry relaxed into the hug and took several deep breaths. “It wasn’t your fault.” Remus repeated to him.

Paul watched the scene with mixed feelings. He had thought that they had covered this topic well and had established that his godfather’s death was not his fault. Now, he wasn’t sure what to think. Perhaps

Harry had just needed Remus' approval or reassurance before the matter could be laid to rest. Paul saw Harry peeking out of Remus' arms and smiled at the boy. He would be fine now. Paul gave Harry a smile and retreated to his office. He could catch up on his paperwork now that Harry was occupied for most of the afternoon. Paul grimaced at the thought of paperwork. He would rather be with Harry.

"This is the theater. I'm in the play and get to play Edmund from King Lear. You'll have to come to that. I'll get Paul to send you a ticket." Harry told him excitedly as he led Remus around the school. "Down this hallway here is the gymnasium. There's someone there I want you to meet." Remus smiled at the animated teenager and followed the boy down the hallway to the gym. Harry peeked into the room before opening the door and leading Remus in. Unfamiliar smells hit Remus' nose, but Harry seemed quite at home here. What was that scent? Blood?

"What happened, Rick?" Harry asked as he approached an older boy and man. The boy was seated on a bench with the elder bandaging his hand. The boy scowled and sighed.

"Live blades, Evan." Rick explained as Sensei grunted. "I lost my concentration, that's all." Sensei grunted again, tied off the bandage and gave Rick a firm cuff to the head. Rick rolled his eyes as Sensei stalked away to put the first aid kit back in its place. "He's worried." Rick told Harry with a shrug. Harry knew that Sensei always grew very quiet when upset. "Who's this?" He asked as he shifted to look at Remus.

"Oh, sorry!" Harry said. "This is Remus, an old friend of mine, and my parents before me. Remus, this is Rick. He and I train together every Saturday." Rick snorted and mumbled something that sounded like 'we get tortured every Saturday', but Remus couldn't be too sure. Rick held out his uninjured hand and stood to greet Remus.

"Nice to meet you. Evan's been talking about your visit for the last two days." Rick told the werewolf.

“It’s nice to meet you, too. What, exactly, do you learn here?” Remus gestured to the gym around him.

“What I wish to teach.” Came Sensei’s voice from right behind Remus. Remus whirled, startled at not having heard Sensei approach him from behind. He always heard others coming up behind him. That was a small part of what he actually liked about being a werewolf. How had this strange man managed to sneak up on him?

“This is Sensei Leonard. He’s my teacher. Sensei, this is Remus Lupin. He’s an old friend of my parents’ and now my friend as well.” Remus eyed the teacher and extended his hand. Sensei studied the man and Harry grinned as Sensei started to circle him, much like Sensei had done when Harry had first met him. Sensei paused and looked Remus over again. There was something about this man. He shook his head to himself and offered his hand to the other, realizing that the other didn’t exactly trust him either. Sensei only raised an eyebrow and shook Remus’ hand once before releasing it.

“Deshi.” He turned, fully expecting that Harry would follow him. He was not disappointed. Harry told Remus that he would be right back and followed Sensei to the far side of the gym. Rick smiled at Remus and asked what Remus thought of the school so far. Harry was glad that Rick was there to distract Remus. He had a feeling that Sensei did not quite approve of Remus. “Who is he?”

“My mentor and advisor. Remus was friends with my parents and has taken care of me since he became a teacher at my school three years ago.” Harry explained.

“Wrong. There is something wrong.” Sensei said, unable to find the words he needed in his distress. “With him.”

“Well, he’s sick a lot.” Harry told him. “I trust Remus with my life and have done so before.” Harry watched as Sensei looked between Remus and Harry, clearly upset, but unable to articulate what was wrong.

“He’s...” He shook his head and mumbled something in a foreign language Harry couldn’t identify. “Different. Like you. Not like you.” Sensei shrugged.

“Yes, he’s like me, in a way.” Harry agreed. “He won’t hurt me, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Harry said. Sensei grunted and turned back to his office. Harry grinned at Sensei’s reaction. That had been precisely the problem. Sensei had been worried that Remus would hurt Harry in some way. Harry went back to Remus and told Rick to take care of his hands. Rick watched them go and smiled. This was a new side to Evan. He felt his father staring at him.

“You know that creeps me out.” Rick complained to the man in the doorway.

“It worked.” Sensei told him. “Tomorrow. We start training him tomorrow. Your hand?” Rick shrugged.

“It’ll heal. It won’t really scar. I’ll just use my right hand tomorrow.” Rick paused and glanced at his stoic father. “You think he is ready for this?”

“If he isn’t, he will become so quickly. He has need of it, and soon.” Sensei stared at the door through which Harry had left.

“How do you know?” Rick asked. Sensei didn’t answer, only turned back to his office to open a long box.

“I just do.” He told his son as he lifted out several items wrapped in black cloth. “I wish I didn’t.” Sensei unrolled the cloth and laid each item down, almost reverent with caution towards each one. “Time will tell.” Rick stared at the articles and held his breath. This could be bad.

“Harry, there are a few things we need to discuss before I leave.” Remus told the boy once they had arrived back to the visitors’ room. Harry gave him a questioning glance as he sat down. “I need to know how close you want this relationship between us, this mentor thing, to become.” Remus saw that Harry did not quite understand. “I work for you now, Harry.” Harry’s eyes grew wide.

"I...I've always thought of you like an uncle. I would be honored if you thought of me like family as well." Harry said quietly. "If it's too painful or awkward..." Harry couldn't finish his sentence as Remus hugged him. "Guess not." He said with a smile.

"Always wanted a nephew." Remus told him as he messed up Harry's neat hairstyle. The boy batted away his hands and smoothed it.

"I just managed to figure out this hair thing!" Harry complained. "So, what else did you need to talk to me about?" Harry asked. Remus smiled and pulled out several papers from his briefcase.

"Sirius left a number of things to you, and your parents' estate was never really settled at all. There are several properties that need looking after and various shares in companies, including the one you took out yourself last year with the Weasley twins." Remus explained.

"I don't have shares in their company!" Harry protested.

"Well, it seems that they gave you some." Remus said with a smile. "Now, the shares can look after themselves for the time being, but the bank has said that the houses are in various states of disrepair, especially the one at Godric's Hollow and your grandfather's house." Harry looked up. "The bank has requested you at least do some kind of repairs to those that need it."

"Exactly how many houses do I own?" Harry asked. Remus looked down at the list. "Four, it appears. Sirius', your parents' house, your grandfather Potter's house, and a little cottage that belonged to your mother that she inherited from an aunt of hers." Harry sat back. He had once felt that he had no home except Hogwarts. Now he had at least four, Hogwarts excluded, and he had a nagging feeling that his Aunt Petunia considered Harry a resident of her own home. Five homes, then.

"I'm rich, aren't I?" Harry asked as though he already knew the answer and it displeased him greatly.

“I’m afraid so. One could use the term ‘filthy rich’ in this case.” Harry groaned and buried his face in his hands. Remus laughed and patted the boy’s shoulder. “It’s not that bad.”

“Don’t tell Ron, whatever you do.” Harry told him. Remus nodded and knew why Harry had asked that of him. Ron had been intensely jealous of Harry’s wealth on more than one occasion. “Can you look after the house repairs?”

“That’s my job, especially since you are in school at the moment. Anything special you want done?” Remus asked.

“Not really. Just make sure they’re habitable. I would like to visit some of them after this,” Harry waved his hands about him. Remus took that to mean the war and Voldemort included. “is over.” Ah, good. He had hope for a future.

“Certainly. No Quidditch pitch?” He asked. Harry looked up with hope in his eyes.

“We can do that?” he asked.

“At every property, if you would like it.” Harry shook his head.

“No, just at one. You can decide where. After all, I can afford to change it later, if I want.” Remus smiled as Harry seemed to accept his wealth.

“That you can.” Remus told him. “Harry, the goblins want to meet with you and Sirius’ lawyer as soon as possible.” Harry frowned. “It will be a private meeting, meaning that only those invited are allowed in, no matter what their rank is.” Harry knew what that meant. Not even Fudge could get into the meeting. That meant Dumbledore wouldn’t be able to do so either.

“I really can’t put it off, can I?” He asked. Remus shook his head with a regretful look. “Alright. If you could set it up with them and let me know the date and time.”

“It is at your convenience.” Remus told him. “They are asking you for specifics.” Harry sighed and rubbed his face, carefully avoiding his hair.

“Can I call you at your house?” Remus smiled and nodded.

“I’ll give you my number. Don’t hesitate to use it, even if it’s at three in the morning.” Harry smiled.

“I’ll be sure to try it sometime.” Harry took the slip of paper from Remus and slid it into his pocket. “Could...” Remus waited patiently for Harry to collect himself. “Could my Aunt Petunia come, too?” Remus was surprised at the question.

“Why?” Remus asked.

“She’s different.” Harry told Remus. “I think she does really care about me, in some weird way.”

“You and your Muggle expressions. ‘Weird.’” Remus teased the boy. “Your Aunt Petunia could come if she wanted. Anyone you wanted to invite, really.” Harry nodded. “I’m glad to see you doing so well, Harry.” Harry smiled.

“Paul says I’m not quite there yet, but I’ll get there soon, wherever there is.” Remus chuckled at Harry’s joke. “I’m going to be okay, if I survive Sensei, that is.”

“What exactly is he training you in?” Remus asked.

“Who knows? Martial arts, but I don’t really hear any specific type. I know how to fight my way out of a bad situation, but I learned how to talk my way out first.” Harry explained. “He’s teaching me survival skills, opposed to the ordinary lessons he usually teaches his

students. Rick, his son, told me that Sensei is training me for something specific, but neither of us can figure out what it is.” Remus looked over Harry for a second.

“If he is training you to catch a girl’s eye, he’s doing it correctly. The girls seem quite taken with you.” He watched as Harry colored a deep red. “Just like your father.”

“Not quite. He was more popular than me.” Remus raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment. “Remus? What do you know about wandless magic?”

“A bit. It depends on what you want to know about it.” Remus replied. Harry didn’t answer. “Harry?” The boy looked like he was coming to some sort of decision.

“Watch.” Harry told him. Harry’s hand twitched and the table hopped to one side, pushing the chairs a little. Remus stared at the table and then at Harry. Harry grinned and he twitched a finger, setting the table back to its spot. The finger moved again and Remus’ briefcase fell over.

“Did you do that?” He asked Harry. Harry did not answer. Instead, the briefcase sat up and snapped closed. “I’m so proud of you! I knew you could do it!” Harry found himself in a hug again. “When did this happen?”

“Sensei scared me and I thought I had killed him. He just kind of flew across the room. Now, he thinks I have some sort of ancient power and demands that I use it. It gets easier every day.” Harry smiled at Remus. “ ‘power the Dark Lord knows not’.” Harry mumbled, more to himself than Remus.

“What was that, Harry?” Harry shrugged.

“Nothing. So, can you help me with the wandless magic?” Harry asked.

“I think we can work out something.” Remus said with a warm smile as he fell into teaching mode. Harry smiled and listened as Remus gave him a few pointers he had learned when he had researched it in school.

Harry pulled out his Mini-Messenger later that night and said the password. He tapped the page with his pen before writing.

Hermione? I need a distraction on October 15th.

What kind of distraction? And why?

I need to go to the wizarding world, but I need all of the teachers at Hogwarts too busy to step outside the gates.

I think I could come up with something, but you’ve only left me two weeks. I may need to contact Gred and Forge for this.

Tell them I sent you. They’ll be thrilled to cause a little mischief at their old school.

Why do you need to go to the wizarding world?

It’s about Sirius’ will. The goblins want to meet with me. I can finance any pranks you need.

I’ll let you know. Are you okay?

I’m fine. So, any ideas yet?

Not yet, but I’ll pass the goal by the PPs and see what they say.

PPs?

Potter’s Protectors, of course. Ones that are loyal to you. Neville, Luna, myself, both Creevy brothers, and Ernie MacMillian.

I don’t want something like that, Mi.

Talk to Neville, Skywalker. He organized it. I think I'm only in it because I'm the only one who can talk to you.

That and you're brilliant, but scary.

True. Anyway, there's nothing you can do about it short of showing up at Hogwarts. They're on your side and hate what Dumbledore is doing.

What is Dumbledore doing?

He's stopped the Daily Prophet from coming here so that nothing incites mass panic. A couple of other little things, like telling the first years rather frightening stories about how dangerous the world is and then telling them that their only key to survival is by "staying on the light". We, the PPs and I, are working on some methods to undermine Dumbledore's actions with the first years.

You, Hermione Granger, are working on something that can go against Dumbledore's actions?

It won't be the first time, will it? (Evil grin)

No, it won't be the first time. See what you can do about the distraction.

I will. Would you like to know the name of the student newspaper we're starting?

A student newspaper? Sure.

"The Students' Voice"

Nice. Send me a copy. Without moving pictures.

I'll see what I can do. Everyone would like a personal statement from you, later on, about the paper.

I'll think about it. See you in November for the play?

I'll be there. Is Remus coming?

Yes, he'll be here. Aunt Petunia too. Just try not to laugh too hard at my acting.

Never. I'll laugh quietly.

Thanks, Mi.

You're welcome.

Harry shut the book and turned towards his bed. He had another meeting with Voldemort coming tonight. If only the Dark Lord hadn't...Harry pushed those thoughts from his mind. He needed to do this, for the best. He closed his eyes and focused on other things. He couldn't let Voldemort carry out his threats. It wasn't fair to everyone else.

Author's Note: Okay, here's another question. What kind of relationship do Draco and Snape have? Here's a hint: It's not slash.

Author's Note: Do not get used to this. I can not update this quickly all of the time. I'm in school right now and the update schedule may get a little crazy, but I will not abandon this fic. Thanks to all reviewers! I love you all!

Hermione snapped off her alarm and crawled out of bed, careful not to wake her roommates. She had just changed into her clothes for the next day when the others had changed into pajamas and made sure her blankets covered her by the time her roommates had entered the room. She could not allow anyone to discover her plans. She walked down the stairs in stocking feet and only pulled on her shoes in the common room. She jumped when she heard voices speaking in harsh whispers coming down the boys' stairs. Hermione dove behind the couch near the fireplace and waited, hoping that it was her comrades and not someone else. She breathed a sigh of relief when Neville's familiar face appeared at the doorway to the stairs. "Wake the entire Tower, why don't you?" She whispered at the group. All of the boys looked immediately contrite at their actions.

"Sorry, Mi." Neville said. "I was telling them to be quiet."

Hermione smiled at Neville and shook her head. "That's alright, Toad." Hermione smiled again at the nickname the group had given Neville at their first official meeting. She, Luna, Neville, the two Creevy brothers, and Ernie Macmillian were ready to help Harry in whatever he needed done and today was the day he needed a distraction to keep all the teachers busy while he appeared in the wizarding world. They decided upon nicknames to fool further any eavesdroppers to the group. The nicknames were obvious once you knew which name applied to which person, but without the context, the name could have been anyone at all. "You guys ready?" She asked the two brothers.

"Ready and willing. Let's do this." Colin said in a whisper, camera at the ready to record the faces of the teachers when they saw the aftermath of the pranks. Harry had recommended the twins for help in setting this up and once Hermione had written a letter describing what Harry needed, the twins were more than happy to provide the means to create an entire day of chaos. All of it was free of charge.

Hermione passed out the bags and led the way out of the dorm, telling the Pink Lady that she and the students had urgent prefect business to do. The Pink Lady merely yawned and waved her hand at the group.

The Gryffindor group met up with Luna and Ernie, Sun and Bucks, respectively, in the Room of Requirement to lay out the final plans. Luna looked wide awake at the ungodly hour, while Ernie was leaning against the wall in a desperate effort to stay awake. "Good morning, Mi. How are you?" Luna said in her typical spacey way. Hermione wondered if anything at all phased the girl as she returned the greeting. Ernie mumbled a hello in Hermione's direction and allowed his eyes to slide closed again.

"All right, everyone. Gather round." Hermione said as she spread out the primary architectural plans for Hogwarts on the ground. They were primary because the image showed only the permanent parts of Hogwarts, the parts that did not move or disappear, in the schematics. "Does everyone have their schoolbooks?" Ernie pushed off the wall and held his bag out. "Good." Hermione said upon seeing everyone ready to appear as nothing more than an eccentric study group if they were at any time discovered. "Toad, you are to take the Herbology section. Sun, you have the Charms corridor. Bucks, you have Transfiguration. Shutter, the Potions dungeons, but for heaven's sake, be careful! Professor Snape is very protective of the place. Do not set anything destructive or that will react with his ingredients." Colin nodded his understanding.

"Fireworks it is then." He said to himself as though he had been trying to figure out exactly what he wanted to do. Hermione nodded her permission and turned to Dennis. "Little Bug, you've History. You will want something spectacular there, because Professor Binns is pretty dull and doesn't notice much. He didn't even notice that he was dead, after all. I'll take Arithmancy and the library. They're really close to each other. We'll meet up after breakfast and set the rest later. After you're done, we'll meet in the library and start studying. Breakfast after that. Any questions?" Ernie raised his hand. "Yes, Bucks?"

“What do we do if we’re caught?” he asked. Hermione wished he hadn’t asked it. She wasn’t quite sure what to tell him.

“You could say that you’ve lost your pet, or you were looking for Neville’s toad.” Luna said. “He loses it all the time and you were so worried about the poor, little defenseless thing that you just couldn’t sleep. It helps if you can manage tears in your eyes.” Hermione stared at Luna and marveled at the unexplored depths to the girl.

“That works for girls, not boys.” Dennis told her with a slight bit of disgust in his voice.

“Best thing to do: Don’t get caught. Now, everyone ready?” Hermione asked as she looked around the group. Several heads nodded up and down. “Alright, let’s go do this.” She and the others smoothed down their uniforms and crept out of the room, bags stowed in their book bags, ready to start a day of mayhem courtesy of the Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. None noticed a magical shield separate to reveal the Potions Master of Hogwarts staring after them with a strange light in his eyes.

“What in the world are you lot up to?” He said to himself as he pondered whether to pursue them or wait and see what would happen. He thought for a few minutes before bracing himself to deal with magical fireworks in his dungeons. He could only discover what it was by allowing them to continue, but he would be sticking to Salazar’s passageways today. He would not risk becoming a victim of a prank.

Harry smoothed out the jacket of his suit and stared at himself in the mirror. His Aunt Petunia had agreed to come to Sirius’ will reading and appeared early that morning with a brand-new suit for Harry. He had to admit that she had decent tastes when she wanted to exhibit them. She said that the green shirt matched his eyes and the black perfect for the business of the day. He only hoped that he could carry off the look with the grace the suit demanded. Paul knocked on the door dressed in a suit of his own. Harry smiled and waved him in. “How you doing, buddy?” he asked.

“I don’t really know myself.” He answered truthfully. He looked like a different person in the suit. More mature, or something along those lines. He wasn’t quite sure what to call it. “You still coming?” He had requested that Paul accompany him and Paul had jumped on the opportunity to see the magical world first hand.

“You couldn’t keep me away. Just don’t let them erase my memory.” Harry smiled and shook his head.

“I’m not the Boy-Who-Lived for nothing. I won’t let them do that to you.” Harry promised. “The title has got to be good for something.” He mumbled. “How do I look?” He asked. Paul looked him over and nodded.

“Very nice. Very professional. Very ‘Super Powerful Wizard’ who is now ‘Filthy Rich Super Powerful Wizard’.” Harry laughed a bit at the teasing.

“Don’t you forget it.” He told Paul with a smirk. Paul pulled off a bow worthy of the Weasley twins and gestured for Harry to leave the room first.

“After you, Super Powerful Wizard.” Harry rolled his eyes and touched the weapons strapped to his wrists under his sleeves. Sensei had introduced him to the weapons and demanded that Harry wear them everywhere, even to bed. That had been difficult the first few days, but now he felt strange when he did take them off. He remembered when Sensei had given him the weapons and showed him how to use them.

(Flashback)

“Come, deshi.” Harry woke up to find Sensei in his room. This was a common occurrence and he nodded to show Sensei that he was awake and would get up the second the man left the room. Sensei stepped into the hallway and Harry pulled on his uniform to go to the dojo. There were days when Sensei decided that Harry needed a bit of extra work and he would wake Harry early in the morning before classes. Harry smoothed his hair and yawned, wondering what it was

that Sensei had to show Harry now. He found Sensei in the hall with a granola bar as an offering of food to the now perpetually hungry teenager. Harry had been told that most teenage boys were always hungry and that it was a part of growing up. Harry now ate almost everything in sight, which made him wonder what Dudley was going through, because he always ate everything in sight.

Harry stretched on the floor, as per Sensei's instructions upon reaching the dojo, and Sensei disappeared in his office to return carrying something wrapped in black cloth. He sat down in front of Harry and motioned Harry closer. "You have survived many attempts on your life, deshi. Most by luck. This will give you better luck." He unwrapped the cloth and displayed what looked like two leather braces for wrists, much like what Harry had seen archers wear when they practiced. The only difference was that these were flexible and covered only half of the forearm. Small spikes lay in little loops around the leather.

"What are they, Sensei?" Harry asked. He understood the concept. The sharp pointy things went into the other men. He just didn't know why Sensei was giving him this, or what Sensei wanted him to do with them.

"Throwing spikes. They will not kill. Disarm, discourage, only purpose." Well, a wizard would be in trouble if one of the spikes ended in his hand. "Try this on." Sensei said as he took hold of Harry's arm. Harry rolled up his sleeve and watched as Sensei fastened the device to his arm and adjusted the buckles. "Target practice. Hit the middle." Sensei demonstrated how to use the spikes and how to move his arm to allow a spike drop into his hand. Harry smiled when Sensei launched a spike at a target only to see the spike hit the middle of the target. Sensei left Harry to it when he finished. Harry worked for almost an hour before he managed to hit the middle, although he had hit the target itself every time. "Good." Sensei barked out when Harry had finally hit the middle. "Always wear. Never take off unless you are in here, or the shower." Sensei paused to look over Harry. "Show these to your friends?" It wasn't a question.

“No way.” Harry answered. “This could give me the second I need to get away. Only you and I will know these are here.” Harry promised. “I’m not even going to tell Paul about this.” Sensei gifted Harry with one of his rare smiles.

“After my heart.” Sensei told him. “Good. Now, breakfast!” Harry nodded and changed into his uniform (now long-sleeved due to the encroaching cold weather) and dashed to breakfast, his mouth watering at the smell of sausages.

(End Flashback)

Paul led Harry down to the reception room where Petunia was waiting. She smiled upon seeing Harry and straightened his tie. Harry allowed the attention and thanked her for the suit. “Not a problem. You needed one, anyway.” She told him. “Are we ready to leave yet?” She asked.

“I think so. Remus said that he will meet us at the Leaky Cauldron at three.” Harry said as he dodged her efforts to tame his hair. Rick had helped with it and Harry liked it. Aunt Petunia didn’t need to touch it. “Stop!” He said in an exasperated tone. “It’s as good as it’s going to get.” He froze when his brain caught up with him mouth. He couldn’t believe that he had just snapped at Aunt Petunia. It felt familiar, but he wasn’t sure why. An image of an eleven-year-old Ron telling his mother to “gerroff” popped in his head. Had he just done that?

“I suppose it’s the style these days.” Petunia said in a long-suffering tone. She acted as though it was completely normal to have her nephew say something like that to her. She wasn’t mad at him for being disrespectful.

“Sorry.” Harry said. She looked surprised at him for a minute and then gave him another smile. What was with all the smiles?

“If it works for you.” Petunia told him. Harry nodded and she shrugged as though to say ‘oh, well.’ Petunia picked up her purse and started towards the door. “Shall we, gentlemen?” She asked. Harry shrugged at Paul and followed her, while Paul snickered behind his

hand. Harry put on the sunglasses Paul had said made him look like a secret agent and blinked against the sunlight. He wondered if it was possible for a mortal to turn into a vampire through a dislike of morning sunbeams. He certainly felt like it. He stopped in surprise to see Sensei standing next to Petunia's car in a suit, looking quite dangerous in his own right.

"You should have told me you were leaving." Harry looked to Paul for help. Sensei didn't know! "Come, deshi. Sun is waiting." Petunia unlocked the car and Sensei climbed into the back seat. Petunia looked at Harry.

"Why are you here, Sensei?" Harry asked as he opened his own door. He didn't get in yet, as getting in would claim readiness.

"You are returning to your old life. I will act as your protection today." He explained as though it was obvious to everyone but Harry.

"You don't need to do that, Sensei." Harry told the man. "I'm sure I'll be fine." Sensei looked him over and grunted. He faced forward and proceeded to ignore Harry's protests. Harry groaned and got in next to him. Why was Sensei being difficult? What would he say to Remus? Paul snagged the front seat next to Petunia and started questioning her on her favorite books. Harry pulled out the CD player Hermione had given him and proceeded to lose himself in the joys of the Beatles. She had only given him about six CDs of their music. That should last all the way to London, shouldn't it?

Harry woke up to hear "Yellow Submarine" playing in his ears. Something had poked him. He opened his eyes and looked at Sensei, who gave him a mischievous smile. "We are here." Harry rubbed his eye and mumbled something to the man as he realized that he needed to fix his contact lens he had just managed to move. Sensei made a face as Harry willing poked himself in the eye in his efforts to fix the lens. Petunia parked the car and Harry noticed that they were a just a street over from the Leaky Cauldron.

"Just to warn you all, you might see some pretty surprising things today that I won't have time to explain. I'll answer any questions you

have later.” Harry explained. “Just try not to stare too much. It’ll give you away.” Sensei slid his own pair of sunglasses on to his face as though to say ‘no worries there’. Harry led the way to the pub, wondering if he had a chance to turn back. He hadn’t talked with Hermione yet today and he didn’t know if her distraction had worked. Dumbledore could be hovering just inside the Leakey Cauldron, waiting for Harry to show his face. He felt a hand land his shoulder. It was Paul.

“Got your back, kiddo.” He said. Harry smiled and made sure his hair fell over his scar and the sunglasses hid his eyes. Who ever thought that Muggle sunglasses could help hide his identity? Harry tried to open the door and enter, but Sensei beat him to it. Harry hoped that no hags were visible. Harry went in behind him and Petunia and Paul followed. This was going to be a disaster. Sensei paused in the vestibule. Harry pulled out his plain black robe and slipped it on over his suit.

“I need to go first, Sensei.” He whispered to the man. “You don’t know where to go.” Sensei allowed Harry to step forward, but he stayed close to his student, obviously not fond of the clientele of the Leaky Cauldron. Harry kept his head down and led the way through the main part of the pub. He saw Remus sitting at a table and waved at him. Remus smiled and stood. “Hi, Remus.” Harry said softly.

“Hello. Nice to see everyone.” Remus said as he looked over the group.

“Not my idea.” He explained. “He wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Remus only smiled and nodded.

“That’s fine. Let’s get you to Gringotts.” Harry allowed Remus to lead the way, as it looked better to be a kid rather than the leader. Remus waved to Tom and led the entire group the archway. “You might all see some surprising things here. Just keep all questions until the end and Harry and I will answer to the best of our abilities.” Remus produced his wand and tapped the bricks. Sensei had tensed for a moment and then relaxed as he realized that it was not a weapon (that he could identify). “Welcome to Diagon Alley.” Remus

told the group. Paul stared before giving himself a mental slap and Sensei's face had not changed at all, despite the fact that a solid brick wall had just opened in front of him.

Remus went through the archway while pulling on his own cloak. Harry ducked his head and followed, with Sensei on his one side, Petunia on his other, and Paul bringing up the rear. He felt almost important with so many people following him. Remus walked taller, if he could call it that, and people backed out of his way. No one had recognized Harry...yet. After all, Harry Potter always came to Diagon Alley alone or with his two best friends. Why would adults surround him when he should be at school?

Harry peeked a look at Sensei and smiled when he saw the man visibly controlling his reactions to "Magical Menagerie" and "Owl Post". He had a feeling that he would be explaining many things to the man later, but for now, he was acting as though he belonged here. Good. There was less of a chance of someone thinking he did not belong here. Paul, on the other hand, could not help but whisper questions to Petunia, whom found herself unable to answer and passed the questions onto Harry. Harry answered the best he could until they actually reached Gringotts. The rhyme over the main doors hadn't changed. Sensei had mouthed the words to himself while Petunia just stared. Oh, well. She could be explained away. She was, after all, a Muggle.

Remus did not bother going towards the counter. He led the entire group towards a side hallway opposite the direction for the vaults. A receptionist (another goblin, who was eyeing the three Muggles of the group with a fair amount of distrust in his eyes) greeted them at the end of the hallway. "Key, please." Harry pulled out his key and handed it over to the rather terse goblin. The creature inserted the key into a machine and pushed a button. He jumped when he read the screen in front of him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. We are very glad you could make it." He told Harry as his entire demeanor changed. Harry removed his sunglasses and smiled at the goblin.

"Thank you." Harry paused to read the nameplate. "Blackmoss. I'm glad I could make it." He replied. The goblin hopped down from his stool and scurried around the edge of the desk.

“If you would follow me, Mr. Potter, and your guests as well, I’ll show you somewhere more comfortable. Mr. Black’s head goblin will be down directly.” Blackmoss opened a door into a rather homey looking room, complete with fireplace and armchairs. “Tea will be brought in directly.” Harry smiled and thanked him. It paid to be polite to the goblins. Blackmoss closed the door behind him as he left. Harry was about to collapse in a chair when Remus stopped him.

“Sit down normally and don’t slouch.” He told Harry.

“Is this what a mentor does?” Harry questioned. “Boss people around?” Remus looked thoughtful and shook his head.

“No. That’s an uncle’s job.” Harry rolled his eyes, but sat down calmly, careful not to wrinkle his robe too much. He saw Paul about to burst with a question.

“Out with it.” He told the man. Paul relaxed into a chair and smiled.

“What was that?” He asked. Harry refrained from asking ‘which part’ and smiled. He had a fair idea what his therapist wanted to know.

“That, Paul, was a goblin. Gringott’s is the safest place in the world for anything you care to store. Goblins are very protective of wealth and guard it very well.” Sensei snorted behind Harry. “Did you have a question, Sensei?”

“Goblins?” He said. Harry nodded. “A few things, you forgot to mention.” Harry nodded again. “We will talk later, deshi.” Harry opened his mouth, but Remus beat him to it.

“Harry, or Evan, as you know him, is not allowed to reveal this world without extenuating circumstances. He could tell his aunt, because she is his guardian, and he could tell Paul because he is his doctor, but you, I’m afraid, didn’t make the list as a “need to know” person.” Remus explained. “It’s not because he didn’t trust you with his secret. He just wasn’t allowed to tell you.” Sensei frowned and nodded, taking in Remus’ answer.

“And you? What are you?” Sensei asked. Remus gave him an amused smile.

“I am both a wizard and a werewolf.” Sensei’s face changed behind his glasses.

“I see. And deshi, a wizard?” Remus nodded.

“That’s right.” Sensei folded his arms and stood behind Harry’s chair. Harry looked up at him. Was Sensei still upset with him?

“Explains a few things.” He told Harry with a smile. Harry nodded. “He can do it?” He asked, pointing at Remus. Remus laughed a bit and shook his head.

“Not like Harry can.” Remus told him. Sensei raised an eyebrow at Harry and smiled again.

“Don’t remind me. I miss being normal.” Harry complained. He just wanted to be that slightly odd person down the block, not this famous wizard the entire world was making him out to be. The States were looking better all the time. Paul snorted.

“I don’t think you realize how normal you are. Normal people don’t want fame. You certainly didn’t ask for it.” Harry nodded and smiled as tea popped up in front of him. Sensei stopped him and inspected the tea tray. Harry groaned.

“Sensei, I’m starving.” Harry whined. Sensei gave him a look as though to say ‘Do I look like I care?’ Paul mumbled something behind Harry that sounded something like ‘yeah, completely normal teenager there’. Remus waved his wand and smiled as Sensei eyed him like a threat.

“It’s safe, Harry.” Harry helped himself to the tea and handed a cup to his aunt. “I wonder what’s taking so long.” Remus said a few minutes later once Harry had devoured two scones. A rather loud

crash sounded from the other door in the room. Harry glanced at the door and smiled.

“I think he’s arrived.” Harry said in a whisper. Remus nodded and waved his wand at Harry, making sure that all crumbs had disappeared from his clothing. Blackmoss re-entered the room as Harry replaced his cup on the tray.

“Mr. Potter, Gablewall is ready to meet you, if you and your guests would care to come this way.” Remus and Harry stood to go in first, with Sensei right behind him and Paul and Petunia coming after him. Harry found a rather harried looking goblin standing to meet him.

“Mr. Potter, such an honor to meet you. Mr. Lupin.” Harry and Remus shook the offered hand and sat in the seats marked with their names.

“Aunt Petunia?” Harry motioned for her to sit next to him. Harry noticed Sensei shake his head. He would not be sitting. Paul took the seat on the other side of Remus and Sensei hovered behind Harry again. Gablewall froze and looked at the man.

“Mr. Potter, may I ask?” He gestured at Sensei with a frightened look and shaking hand.

“Protection.” Sensei offered. Gablewall relaxed at the word.

“Ah, a bodyguard. I understand now.” Harry fought back a smile and turned to Gablewall. “Please let me express my sincere condolences on the loss of your godfather.” Gablewall started. Harry thanked him and motioned for him to continue. “Mr. Black has left explicit instructions on the management of his estate.” Harry felt someone take his hand under the table. He glanced to his right and saw his Aunt Petunia looking straight ahead at Gablewall. How had she known? He squeezed her hand the slightest bit and she returned it. Everyone here with him was in his corner. That was great. “Let’s begin, shall we?” Harry nodded and Gablewall pulled out the will.

Harry left the meeting room in a slight daze. He was having trouble remembering how to walk. He never wanted to go through anything like that again. Sensei lowered him into the armchair Harry had chosen earlier while Paul crouched down in front of Harry. "You okay, Harry?" Harry took a few deep breaths while he tried to pull himself together. How could Sirius expect so much of him? Why would he? Someone was smoothing his hair. That felt good. He took a mental catalogue of whom he could see and deduced that it was Aunt Petunia. Oh, well. He wasn't going to stop her. It felt nice and he needed a bit of comfort.

"Why would he do that?" He asked Remus as he fought back tears. "He left everything to me. Why?" He rubbed his face and cursed as he moved his contact lens again. He maneuvered the thing back into place and looked at Remus for an explanation. "He had other relatives."

"And he asked you to make sure that they got their share, Harry. He didn't want his relatives to go through something impersonal." Rage boiled up in Harry. What a nice sentiment!

"So I have to go through the impersonal stuff?" He demanded.

"You are his heir." Remus told Harry. "He wouldn't have done it this way if he thought it would do this to you. I'm sure of that, Harry." The words calmed Harry a bit and he waved Paul away from him.

"At least I managed to walk out of the room before losing it." Harry told Remus. Remus gave Harry a smile and nodded as he leaned on his cane.

"There is that. The goblins respect you, which will help you later in life." Harry stood and smoothed down his robes. "You ready?" Harry nodded and gestured for everyone to move out. He noticed that they had fallen into a pattern. "I hope you don't mind, but I've ordered you some stationary with the crests on them. You can write to Sirius' relatives with that. They'll know you're serious then." Harry smiled at the old joke.

“I’m not Sirius. That’s my godfather.” Remus stopped and blinked after him.

“That never gets old, does it?” Remus asked. Harry shook his head and straightened his shoulders. If Dumbledore was waiting for him, he wanted to shock the man a bit. He was a bit disappointed to realize that Dumbledore was not waiting at all. Gringott’s carried on with its business without notice of him. He smiled to himself and he left the bank, surrounded by people who actually cared for him.

“No time for ice cream?” Harry whispered to Remus.

“No.” Sensei snapped behind him. Harry turned his head and stared at the man. “Too dangerous.” Harry nodded and then snickered as Sensei gave him what Rick called the man’s ‘evil smile’. “We have ice cream at school.” Paul glanced at Sensei with a frightened look in his eyes.

“I’ll let you deal with him. He’s too hyper on sugar for me.” Harry gave an affronted look and snorted.

“I don’t do ‘hyper’.” Petunia looked like she was struggling to hold back laughter. “I don’t!”

“Harry, you are speaking to the woman who raised you from a baby. You were hyperactive on the slightest bit of sugar. Why do you think I kept it from you so often?” Harry stopped walking as the pieces fell into place.

“That’s why?” He demanded. Petunia gave him a look that said that it should have been obvious. “That explains a lot.” Petunia raised her eyebrow a la Snape and nodded.

“That it does.” Harry walked when Sensei nudged him forward. He was looking forward to raiding the kitchens with Sensei later that night (he and the man had already managed it several times without being caught). He hoped that the staff had replenished his newest favorite, mint chocolate chip, in the freezer. He stopped a few paces later. Something was...off. “Something’s not right.” Harry whispered to

himself. No one seemed to notice. "Something's wrong." Sensei pulled Harry towards one side of the alley and stood in front of him as he scanned for threats.

"Come, deshi." He ushered Harry towards the Leaky Cauldron. The whole of Diagon Alley seemed to tilt sideways in the next second. Death Eaters came from everywhere as they fired spells on the patrons. Harry found himself pushed behind several bodies as first Remus, then Petunia, Paul and Sensei shielded him from the chaos. Harry squirmed behind them and tried to fight his way to the front.

"Muggles!" A delighted voice said in front of the group. Harry dropped to his knees, crawled out from behind the adults, and stood. "Oh, what fun!" Harry shivered as the voice reminded him of something not quite human. He glanced at the Death Eater and decided it wasn't Voldemort. "What spell shall I use?" He questioned Petunia.

Harry spun away from Sensei's hand and rushed forward. His wand appeared in his hand and he faced the Death Eater. "Disapparation?" Harry asked the Death Eater. The man in disguise actually froze when he caught sight of Harry.

"Potter!" He shouted.

"The one and only." Harry told him, wand still pointed in the man's direction. Another Death Eater rushed up and grabbed the other.

"The Dark Lord has ordered that Potter is not to be touched." The Death Eater scanned the people behind Harry. "Or his friends." The last word was sneered. Harry had never heard this man's voice before, so he figured that he was new to the Death Eater game.

"We should be able to play with Muggles! Potter has been a thorn in our Lord's side for years." The other Death Eater raised his wand against the first. "Why should we change?"

"Potter is not to be touched!" He commanded. Harry watched the bizarre scene with a feeling of having found an alternate dimension.

The first Death Eater raised his wand towards Harry. The second tapped the man on the head with his own wand and Harry could almost hear the smirk the man gave him. "Sorry about that, Potter. Some just need a bit of persuasion." He gave a short bow to the entire group and rushed off in the opposite direction. Harry watched the scene in front of him, mainly shots of Crucio and knew he couldn't allow it to continue. He shut his eyes.

"Deshi, you must listen if I am to keep you safe!" Sensei snapped. Harry waved him off. "What are you doing?" Harry decided that Sensei only spoke in complete sentences when he wanted to make a point.

"Stopping them." He felt slightly detached from the rest of his body as he felt his magic gather much like it did for Aunt Marge's escapade as a hot air balloon.

"Stopping them?" Sensei and Remus said at the same time. Harry didn't hear them. He couldn't hear anything at all for a few minutes, and he didn't realize that both Remus and Paul were trying to touch him, to pull him away, for those few minutes. He felt light for a few seconds before he heard the song of a phoenix and he slid into the welcoming darkness. Sensei rushed forward to catch him and lift him in his arms, turning to the Leaky Cauldron and ready to run for cover.

"Sensei. Look." Paul gasped out. Sensei turned and saw all of the men in masks and cloaks frozen in position, while the civilians were running for cover. Pops started all over the alley and other men in cloaks started to appear.

"Quickly. Harry can't be seen." Petunia told Sensei. Several Aurors called for them to stop, but they managed to get through the door before the Aurors could reach them. Petunia ushered everyone to the car and started the engine immediately.

"No wonder no one can protect him." Sensei grumbled. "He needs protection from himself." He lowered Harry down onto the back seat. Remus allowed Harry's head to rest on his lap while Sensei became a place for Harry's legs. Remus tapped Harry's forehead with his

wand and muttered the diagnostic spell he had heard Pomfrey use on him when he was at school. He stared at the script before him and smiled.

“He’ll be fine.” He told the entire car. “He’s just tired. He’ll sleep for a while, that’s all.” Sensei was not happy with the announcement.

“Rest in the infirmary, where others may watch him.” Paul agreed.

“I’ll sign him in.” Petunia nodded at the suggestion while Remus gave an amused look. Paul and Sensei were going to be very unpopular when Harry woke up. He only hoped that Harry would react in the sense the act was meant. These men cared about him. He hoped Harry would see that.

Dumbledore hurried down that hallway of the Ministry to the holding cells of the Magical Law Enforcement Division. Most of the Death Eaters were still recovering from whatever had happened at Diagon Alley earlier that day. The few that were awake were a little worse for wear, not quite able to remember who they were, much less who they served. Several mediwizards had been called from St. Mungo’s to treat them. It was quite a ‘Lockhart effect’ from what every one had said so far. They had vague ideas, but no hard facts to piece together their lives. Some had not managed to wake up yet, existing in a bit of catatonic state. Dumbledore was concerned with only one wizard. He found the man relaxing in a private room away from the prying eyes of the press.

“William. How are you?” Dumbledore asked as he entered the room. William stood and shook Dumbledore’s hand.

“Just fine, Headmaster.” Dumbledore nodded to Kingsley and smiled. Kingsley nodded back and hurried off to his own work. Professor Zareh pulled on his normal robes and hid the mask in one of his many pockets. The two men Flooed back to Hogwarts and William lowered himself into Snape’s customary chair. Dumbledore called for a house elf to bring tea.

“What can you tell me, William?” Dumbledore asked. William smiled and relaxed into the chair.

“There is something going on with the Dark Lord. He gave very strange orders today regarding a certain boy. A Harry Potter.” Dumbledore straightened in his seat. A house elf appeared with a tea that could have served at least twenty starving Harry Potters. William took a cup and sipped it. “He told the Death Eaters ‘the boy is not to be harmed’”. Several Death Eaters were not quite happy about it.” William took a scone and ate it before continuing. “Anyone with Potter was to find the same ‘mercy’ applied.” Dumbledore’s eyes darkened.

“For what purpose?” Dumbledore mused. “Why would he do it? What is he planning?” He asked the air. Fawkes trilled a note and went back to preening his feathers.

“I can’t answer that question. I was lucky enough to see his orders in action. I had to stop a Death Eater from going against them.” Dumbledore jerked to attention at that remark.

“Harry was in Diagon Alley today?” William nodded and finished off his cup. He held it out and Dumbledore refilled it.

“He was. His aunt was with him, as well as two men. There was another person, but I didn’t get a good look at him.” William explained. “They all seemed very anxious to protect the boy, while the boy seemed to want to protect them. He has no fear, that one.” William told him. “I saved an idiot’s life when he wanted to attack Potter and then tried to lead focus away from the boy. I tried to grab him and take him to Headquarters, but by the time I started forward to do so, another man had a hold of him and tried to lead him away. If I had tried to get the boy, someone, perhaps even Potter, could have gotten seriously hurt.” He explained. Dumbledore nodded.

“I understand, William. You did what you could. We now know that Harry is in England, at the very least.” Dumbledore told him. “Have you any explanation as to what happened in Diagon Alley with the Death Eaters?” William shrugged and finished his tea.

“Your guess is as good as mine in this one. I was the only one left standing.” Dumbledore mused on the revelation. “How’s everything downstairs?” He asked, curious as to how the prank removal was going.

“The children have earned a holiday. The pranksters must be turning cartwheels somewhere in their dormitories.” Dumbledore would never know how right he was, as a certain group of students were celebrating in the Room of Requirement with a small party provided by Dobby the house elf. Two Slytherins watched them from the safety of Salazar’s passages.

Author's Note: Anyone know how to shut off the Muses? They are interfereing with my paper writing.

Author's Note: Again, do not get used to such regular updates. The Muses have conspired to keep me at the computer. Thank them for this chapter.

Something was wrong. That much was certain. No one had returned to him. None of the reports from Diagon Alley was favorable. He had only Wormtail left, who was currently licking his wounds in the corner after suffering through his Lord's impatience. Why did no one return? What had happened? "Wormtail." The cowering man shuffled over and made a sketchy bow to Voldemort. "Use your talent. Find out what is going on in Diagon Alley. Find the rest of my servants. Do not come back without them." Wormtail rushed from the room. Voldemort went to sit before the fire, allowing Nagini to slither into his lap. "What has happened, Nagini?" He whispered to his pet. The snake could not give him an answer.

Harry rolled over and grimaced when sunlight hit him full in the face. He must have slept in, because sunlight never hit his room until late morning. Sleeping in didn't make any sense at all, though, because Sensei never let him miss class. He opened his eyes and looked around. His first instincts had screamed "Hospital Wing", which he figured this was, but it wasn't Hogwarts. There were Muggle lights and the faint buzz of electricity in the background. A Muggle machine beeped somewhere above his head and he heard the sound of someone writing very close to him. Where was he? "Awake?"

Harry rolled back to his other side to find Dr. Lansky there with a clipboard in his hand. Harry looked up at him before giving an answer. "I think so." He told the doctor.

Dr. Lansky made a funny sound in his throat while producing a small pen flashlight. "Look at me, please." He requested. Harry stared at Dr. Lansky and allowed the man to shine the light in his eyes. "No concussion. Remember anything?" Harry had no idea what the man was talking about. He said as much to the man. "It's normal. Sometimes, right before an accident, our brains sort of blank out, leaving gaps in our memories. The accident is such a shock, we just forget what happened, simply in an effort to deal with the shock. You'll be fine, though I want to keep you in here another day." The doctor explained to Harry.

“Do I have to?” Harry asked. Sensei would be furious with Harry missing classes, and Paul had promised that they would go to Diagon Alley together. What a minute. “What’s today’s date?” He asked with a feeling of dread growing in his stomach.

“I was wondering when you would ask that.” Dr. Lansky said. “Today is October seventeenth. You were brought to me late on October fifteenth with no real explanation as to how you were unconscious. All Paul could tell me was that you were fine one minute, and the next, collapsed on the street. Care to tell me what you know?” Dan Lansky looked at his patient with a curious glint in his eyes.

“I just remember feeling tired. That’s all.” Harry explained, hoping the man would buy it. Harry had no idea how to fool a Muggle medical professional. He couldn’t fool Madame Pomfrey, but how did one go about fooling magic? This should be easier, at any rate. The doctor pulled a chair over to his bed and sat down.

“Tired? What kind of tired?” Dr. Lansky asked his patient.

Harry shrugged. He remembered parts now, mostly that he, his Aunt Petunia, Remus, Sensei, and Paul had all gone to Diagon Alley, he had heard Sirius’ will, and that was about it. Something about ice cream, which made no sense at all to Harry’s scattered memories. He had such a craving for mint chocolate chip. Weird. “Just tired. Kind of heavy. That’s all.”

“Just...tired.” The doctor wasn’t quite buying it. “Heavy? You mean that your body felt heavy?” Harry decided that that was the best way to explain his made up symptoms and nodded. “Are you sleeping at night?”

“Sometimes. I know I don’t sleep as much as I should. I like to read.” Dr. Lansky raised an eyebrow at Harry’s explanation. “I lose track of time.” He ducked his head as though he was ashamed.

“Physical exhaustion is very dangerous, 007. There are many things that could happen while you’re sleep-deprived. You know that, right?” Dr. Lansky asked his patient.

“I know that. I just kind of...forgot.” Harry answered him. “I’m really sorry.” He apologized. He couldn’t tell the man what had really happened. Where was Paul? He could have taken care of this.

“Alright. You’ll stay here for the rest of today, and I’ll release you in the morning if I am satisfied that you slept the whole night. I’m going to keep an eye on you, Bond.” Harry gave a sheepish smile and nodded. “No more all-nighters.” He warned Harry.

“I have never stayed up the whole night.” He told the doctor. The doctor raised an eyebrow. “Only most of the night.” Dr. Lansky only shook his head at Harry’s comment and held out Harry’s book bag.

“Paul dropped this off right before you woke up. He said that he ‘d be down to eat dinner with you, which will happen in about half an hour. He suggests that you start on your make-up work.”

“Thanks, Dr. Lansky.” Harry said as he saw that both his magical and Muggle books had been included.

Dr. Lansky waved away the thanks. “Paul told me to tell you that your friend, Remus Lupin, will be stopping by after dinner before he goes away the next two days.” Harry knew what that meant. The full moon was near. “I reserve the right to remove your friend if he wears you out.” Dan told him.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.” Harry assured him. “Remus is more careful about my health than I am.” Harry pulled out his Spanish work and set to memorizing his vocabulary words. Magic would have to wait until he was out of the hospital wing. He didn’t want to reveal his talents to more than Paul and Sensei. The two of them were already enough, and Joe knowing only complicated matters. Why was he getting away with revealing the magical world and heavy wandless magic? More importantly, did anyone know what he was doing?

“Zambini came to me earlier today and told me that the Dark Lord is now actively recruiting from the Hogwarts population since the attack in Diagon Alley.” Draco said as he pulled on protective equipment for his upcoming duel. Snape snorted next to him.

“He’s becoming desperate then.” Snape told his protégé. “How many are receptive to the offers of ‘power and glory’?” Snape said with a sneer worthy of Longbottom’s exploded cauldron.

Draco grimaced. “Far more than there should be. Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson, and Nott seem the most eager, along with all of the prefects for the seventh year. Your Head Boy is ready to do his duty to the Dark Lord, while the Head Girl has barricaded herself in her room in an effort to escape everyone around her.” Snape raised an eyebrow. There was some news there. Why would the girl do such things? Slytherin House had a long tradition of choosing their own Head Boy and Girl, an effort to bring some kind of leadership to the prefects, and Severus had found that it worked well for such an insular house. The two were impartial, loyal only to the House, and, Snape had thought, to him. Now, he wasn’t so sure what to think about his Head Boy and Girl. He made a mental note to meet with them separately to ascertain exactly where each stood in regards to the Dark Lord, and if he had any reason to worry. Draco’s voice broke him from his reverie.

“Zambini is indifferent. That boy should have been a Ravenclaw.” Draco commented. “He cares only for knowledge and the power knowledge brings. He has made discreet inquiries about the Dark Lord and did not like what my father had to say.”

“Good. One less child to worry about.” Snape said as he finished with his gloves and helped Draco with his. Snape motioned for Draco to choose which weapon he wanted. Draco chose his usual blade and waited for Snape to do the same. Snape took his practice blade and faced Draco. He had been teaching Draco how to fence since the boy had come to Hogwarts. Now, Draco proved a rather good opponent and fencing was an outlet of frustration for the two of them.

“How is everything with the Protectors?” He asked as he blocked Draco.

“Annoying as ever. Weasley seems to think he has some sort of rank on the rest of us, having actually been in battle. I don’t think he would have survived had Potter not been there.” Draco told the man as he took as his annoyance on the blades.

Snape stopped in shock, only to have to block wildly to save his neck. “Did I hear you correctly?” Snape demanded as he returned the attack. Draco grinned from behind his mask. “Did you just say something decent about Potter?” Snape asked the younger.

“If you spread it around, I’ll denounce you as a liar.” Draco warned him. “I’ve been spending a lot of time with Granger, Longbottom, and Lovegood.” Snape gave him a sympathetic look behind his own mask. “They’re not that bad, so long as Lovegood doesn’t bring up something imaginary.” He explained to Snape. “Granger has not let anything slip about her experiences with Potter, but Longbottom will tell a few things, while Lovegood manages to draw all sorts of erroneous conclusions from Potter’s adventures, linking them to imagined conspiracies.” He gave a wry grin. “I will say this: I am never bored.” Draco let out a sigh as Snape snorted and disarmed Draco.

“Just distracted.” Snape told him. He removed his own facemask and turned to face Draco. “No. I was wrong. Exhausted.” Snape took hold of Draco’s chin and turned the boy’s face up to look at it. “Do you ever sleep?” He asked of the blonde Slytherin. Draco only shrugged. Snape made a noise deep in his throat and banished the weapons. “Even I sleep, Draco.” The Room of Requirement changed to have a bed in one corner and a bookcase in the other. “Go and sleep.” Draco jumped as his fencing gear changed pajamas.

“I can’t do that.” Draco told him.

“Are you arguing with me over your physical welfare?” Snape asked dangerously, as though pleading with the boy to question him further. They had agreed that Snape would have the authority to step in if

Draco needed an adult while at Hogwarts for his last two years. He had wondered when Draco would test the boundaries.

“No.” Draco said, shaking his head to deny that he was arguing. “It’s just that the first issue of ‘The Students’ Voice’ is coming out.” Snape rolled his eyes at Draco’s explanation. “I don’t want to miss it.” Draco said, shifting from foot to foot as the cold stones beneath his now bare feet chilled him.

“Have you forgotten something?” Snape asked, pulling out the necklace he currently wore from under his shirt. Draco nodded sheepishly. “Go and sleep. I’ll wake you in plenty of time. It won’t hurt you to miss training today.” Draco finally complied with Snape’s orders and was asleep just ten minutes later. The boy had to be exhausted. Snape pulled a book from the shelf and settled into an armchair the Room had thoughtfully provided and tucked the Time-Turner back under his shirt. Thank goodness for contraband Ministry artifacts and equipment. It enabled him to train Draco without any unexplained absences on either of their parts.

His thoughts drifted from the book and back towards what Draco had said. The first issue of the ‘The Students’ Voice’ was coming out. The newspaper had announced itself as an opposition to the current policy concerning ‘The Daily Prophet’. Severus never really liked the wizarding newspaper, but this one, this ‘Students’ Voice’ held a lot of intrigue. Too bad he couldn’t read it. Every announcement and future issues were charmed to look like class notes written by a student struggling not to fall asleep. He had been outraged when he saw one that looked like Potions notes. As though anyone would dare to fall asleep in his class!

The only reason Snape knew what those random pieces of paper were was thanks to Draco. The boy had sought him out the minute the announcement for the paper appeared in the common rooms and explained what each issue would look like. He had gained a promise from the boy to have the news read to him. This worked in two ways. One: he and Draco could spend more time together. Two: Snape would know how the students thought. Snape mused for a while when he realized that none of the other teachers knew anything

about it, including Dumbledore. He gave a rather contented smirk and turned to his book. He loved knowing something others did not.

"Hello, Evan." Remus' voice made Harry jump. He smiled at his mentor and closed his notebook. Remus was more interesting than math at the moment.

"Hi, Remus. Paul told me that you were stopping by tonight." Harry motioned for Remus to sit down. Harry could tell that the full moon was close, for Remus looked exhausted. His eyes were drawn and he moved stiffly as though something pained him somewhere.

"You look no worse for the wear after that stunt you pulled in Diagon Alley." Remus said as he looked Harry over with a critical eye.

"I feel fine." He told Remus. "I slept for the better part of two days, but I don't feel any different than I usually do." He shrugged, as though he wasn't quite sure what else he could say to convince Remus of his health.

"You look alright. I was just worried about it. Did Paul tell you what you did?" Remus asked. Harry shook his head. "You somehow managed to freeze and stun all of the Death Eaters in Diagon Alley, leaving the Order's spy conscious and whole of mind." Remus explained.

"I did what?" Harry demanded.

"Stunned and Confounded around twenty or so Death Eaters. Wandlessly, I might add." Remus said with a smile. "You somehow managed to figure out which one was the Order's spy and leave him alone. All of the rest, well, some of them are in prison, wands broken, while others are still being treated in St. Mungo's. Same ward as Lockhart." Harry blinked at Remus. "Quite an impressive display." He told Harry.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone. I just wanted them to stop." Harry said in a whisper. He jerked as a few memories of the event drifted back to him. "I just wanted them to stop." He told Remus more firmly.

“Yes, well, stop them you did. You managed to figure out which were the high-ranking ones and which were not and treated them accordingly. All of the low ranks are in prison; the high ranks are still in St. Mungo’s. Voldemort’s forces have decreased by almost one-hundred percent.” Harry’s mouth dropped as he imitated a fish. “Flies, Harry, flies.” Remus reminded him.

Harry snapped his mouth shut. “Voldemort is going to be so mad at me.” He sighed. Remus smirked at Harry. “What?” Harry asked.

“Voldemort does not know it was you. No one knows. Well, except for me, Paul, Sensei, and your aunt.” Harry stared again. “The Aurors said that the person who managed that was a sorcerer with the level of magic displayed. They made you out to look like one, too. I haven’t the slightest clue where they got the idea, but the sorcerer they described looks an awful lot like your Sensei.” Harry snorted. What had his magic done while he was unawares? “Your secret is safe for now.” Harry nodded. Remus fumbled in his jacket for a second. “I have something for you.” He told Harry. “I picked it up yesterday when I went back to Diagon Alley to see what the atmosphere was. The Alley seems to think that it has some kind of protector now. I found this at a small little bookshop tucked into a corner.” He handed the book to Harry. “Can you read that?”

Harry took the book and looked down at the title. Being a Book of Secrets and Shadeows of Magical Theorie, Spells, Potions and Draughts, along with various othere notes and notations made by Bleys, magical master of Merlin – For those who do not need a wand or staff “I can read it.” Harry said. “Can you?”

“Yes, I can read the title.” Remus assured him. “The storekeeper could not.” Harry stared at Remus.

“What does that mean?” He asked Remus. Remus gave him a warm smile.

“We’re both mental.” Remus said with a look that gave Harry a sense of “oh well. What do we do about it?” “ Anyway, the last part of

the title intrigued me, because I immediately thought of you.” He told Harry. “We’ve already reached the end of my knowledge about wandless magic. Now, however, this book will most likely guide you.”

“It’s so old.” Harry said in doubt. “Merlin’s teacher.”

“Your Sensei teaches an art that dates back a thousand years or more.” Remus said in a calm voice.

“Point taken.” Harry said. “Thank you, Remus, for everything.” Harry said. Remus smiled again.

“It’s my job, Harry. It was no problem at all.” Remus told him as he messed up Harry’s hair.

Harry smiled and looked at the book in his hands. “I’ll look at this later. If the doctor...”

“The doctor thinks its time for Mr. Lupin to head out and for the doctor’s patient to get some rest.” Harry sighed in relief as the doctor was too preoccupied to notice the magical book. Dr. Lansky stared down Remus as Harry slid the book into his book bag.

“Well, I guess that’s my cue. You take care of yourself, Evan. I’ll stop in after my trip.” Remus told him as he pulled himself to his feet.

“Okay, Remus. Take care.” Harry wished him well and wondered if he had any money to get his Wolfsbane Potion. He frowned for a minute and then remembered what Sirius had done in the way of salary for Remus. The werewolf had enough money to live on for the rest of his life. Harry waved as Remus started for the door. Remus wished the doctor a good day and disappeared out of the door.

“You. Bedtime.” Harry closed up all of his books and put them on the table at the doctor’s order. “I’ll examine you first thing in the morning to see if you’re ready to leave.” Harry nodded and lay down. He ran through the mental exercises to clear his mind as the doctor shut off the overhead lights. He didn’t want to see Voldemort that

night. Voldemort would have to wait. He had a few things to figure out before he could deal with the irritating snake.

Hermione and the other PPs were gathered in the Room of Requirement. The first issue of the student newspaper had gone out and they had charmed any issue to accept subscription lists. Dobby and Winky had agreed to deliver the papers to help Harry Potter's friends. Hermione had not wanted to risk Dobby and Winky's jobs, but the two had insisted, and Hermione could not say no to the rather insistent creatures.

Hermione looked down at the Slytherin sheet before her to see who wanted a subscription. Only a few names appeared on it from the older students, most notably Draco Malfoy, but the rest of the names were from the younger classes. She decided that it was a good thing.

"Here's another insult." Luna said from across the table. "I think it's from Ron Weasley." She told the group. " 'How dare you try something like this? Wait until I find out who you are!'" Luna read aloud. "Charming, isn't he?" She asked the room in general. Ernie Macmillan snickered behind his hand.

"He used to be so nice. Now, I don't know." Hermione told the others. "Oh, looks like someone wants to join!" She said as the message appeared on the Slytherin sheet. " ' Please accept my petition to join your newspaper. I have some views that could be useful to your defense section.'" Hermione read. "Who could that be?" She questioned the paper. A signature appeared and she gasped. Drake.

"Who is it, Mi?" Neville asked as he finished writing someone's name down on his own list.

"Malfoy." Hermione answered. Ernie Macmillan spit out the butter beer he was drinking (courtesy of Dobby and Winky) and Luna made an odd choking sound in the back of her throat. Neville only managed to look thoughtful while the Creevy brothers protested the idea. "Draco Malfoy wants to join the newspaper." Hermione said to herself.

“I think we should let him.” Neville said to the group at large. The entire table froze and looked at him. “No, really. He has a point. He has knowledge about the Death Eaters and Vol-, er, Voldemort that we don’t. No matter how many times we face the Dark Lord, even if we win, we don’t understand him. Malfoy most likely does have that knowledge and he knows how to apply it.” Hermione blinked at Neville in shock.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day that you, Neville Longbottom, would argue in favor of Draco Malfoy.” She told him with a smile. Neville smirked back at her.

“Yes, well. I trained with him most of the summer. I’ve seen a few things you haven’t.” Neville explained. “I vote in favor of letting him in.” Hermione looked around the table.”

“Alright, all in favor?” Everyone raised their hand. “None opposed?” She did not receive an answer. “Draco Malfoy is in. Luna, will you send him the invitation?” Hermione asked the girl. Luna nodded absentmindedly and marked another name down on her list.

“Ginny Weasley wants in.” Ernie Macmillan said into the silence. “What do you think?”

“Let her in.” Luna said. “She’s a good kid.” Luna toyed with one of her butter beer cap earrings and smiled at the corner of the room.

“All in favor?” Hermione asked when no one else moved to do so. Everyone raised their hand again. “None opposed? Good.” Hermione added Ginny’s name to her list and looked back at the Slytherin page.

“Susan Bones wants to join.” Neville told Hermione. Hermione only raised an eyebrow. Everyone voted Susan in.

“If we keep this up, everyone will know.” Hermione said as she turned back to her list. “I’ll send Susan an invitation. Who wants to send Ginny one?” she asked. Neville told her that he would take it. “Good. Now, let’s finish this and start on the next edition’s layout.”

Author's Note: No promises as to when the next chapter will be out. I'd hate to make a promise I couldn't keep. Thanks for reading and reviewing! You guys inspire me!

Author's Note: Here you go, guys! For those of you who are wondering, I received an "A" on my last paper, a "B" on my German test, and a "C+" on my Linguistics test. Or, if you're in England, "O, E, A" respectively. My grades are falling. It's called burnout. It happens every year around this time of the semester. Oh well. Enjoy this chapter, as I go off to contemplate how to salvage my grades.

"I think someone saw me." Draco told Snape as he returned to Snape's rooms through Salazar's passage. "Lovegood kept smiling in my direction." Snape raised an eyebrow at Draco and shook his head.

"Impossible, Draco. No one can see through the barrier." Snape reassured him. "Slytherin was very thorough in his work. If he didn't want anyone to see him, they wouldn't." Snape moved to his next essay in grading and snorted. "If I put my money on anyone, it would be Miss Granger." He told Draco as the boy moved to his customary seat on the sofa. "She is a know-it-all."

"Possibly." Draco sighed. "It was unnerving." Draco propped his feet on the coffee table and loosened his tie, oblivious to the glare he received from Snape. Feet on the furniture? What was this, a Muggle home? The Weasleys?

Snape stood and poured out a drink for himself. He turned to Draco and raised an eyebrow. Draco shook his head. Snape called for a house elf, which immediately appeared with a butterbeer in hand. Snape thanked the creature and handed the butterbeer to Draco, kicking the boy's feet from the tabletop at the same time. Draco rolled his eyes, but sat up all the same. "If you are that unnerved by someone smiling in your general direction, perhaps you should renounce your affiliation with the Protectors." Snape said in a musing tone as he settled himself in his armchair.

"No. That's different. I know what to expect then." Draco explained as he sipped his butterbeer. "The situation in the Room of Requirement was an unknown, and totally unexpected." Draco explained. "The only good thing that happened was the student paper coming out."

“So, what is in ‘The Students’ Voice’?” Snape asked as he tried to keep the curiosity out of his voice. Draco smiled and pulled out the student paper, charmed to look like Transfiguration notes over which some ill-advised student had fallen asleep.

“Front page – Purpose of the Paper.” Draco paused and looked at Snape. Snape motioned for him to read that article. “ ‘Many of you may be wondering why anyone would go through such trouble, and risk so much to establish a newspaper for the students.’” Snape snorted. “What?” Draco demanded.

“That’s Longbottom.” Snape told Draco. “Please, continue. This is vastly amusing.” Snape lounged back in his chair and closed his eyes.

“ ‘A few of my fellow students came to me and complained about the Headmaster’s current policy of not allowing The Daily Prophet to be delivered to the students, in case of mass panic happening after a Death Eater attack. We all agreed that something should be done about this. This newspaper is the result. We promise to do our best to bring you up to the minute news and the most accurate information possible. We offer current events, defense strategies, and some fun as well. If you wish to receive a copy, free of charge, just sign your name on the bottom of this page. Our next issue will be delivered to your bed.’” Draco finished the article and looked at Snape, who seemed to be convulsing. “Are you alright?” Draco asked.

Snape snickered and nodded. “I think I’m going as barmy as the headmaster. Please read another.” Snape asked as he tried to get hold of himself. This much amusement from a student project just seemed wrong, somehow, but it was so funny!

“ ‘Death Eater Attack in Diagon Alley.’” Snape nodded. “There was a massive Death Eater attack in Diagon Alley late this afternoon. No civilian casualties are reported, though several injured were treated and released the same day. Eyewitness reports state that a young man had stopped the Death Eaters single-handedly by freezing and incapacitating them, without a wand. Further inquiries will be made as to the identity of this man and the veracity of this report. Aurors responded to questions with “no comment”. Minister Fudge was not

available for comment, but his spokesperson did say that every effort to secure Diagon Alley against further attacks would be taken.”

“Where are they getting their information, I wonder?” Snape asked Draco.

“No idea, but I hope to find out soon. I asked to join the paper and they voted me in.” Draco told Snape.

“Good.” He said with a contented look. “Very good. If you need help with any future articles, let me know.” Snape told the boy.

“Thanks. ‘Protecting Yourself’?” Snape nodded at the title and Draco started reading. “ ‘These are dangerous times and there are certain steps you can take to protect yourself. First, always make sure to travel in groups. You will be harder to hit if there are people surrounding you. Second, never let your guard down. In the words of one of our former teachers ‘CONSTANT VIGILANCE!’. If something does not appear right to you, leave and report it. Even if it is not a true cause for worry, you and your family will still be safe. Third, study defense, for your life truly depends upon it. Professor Zareh is a fine teacher and is always willing to give you a little extra attention, should you need it or want it. Study groups are great ways to practice your skills. Don’t hesitate to join one. Four, if you come across a Death Eater, run away as fast as you can. That is not a time to show off your skills. Death Eaters are dangerous, but they can’t hurt you if they can’t catch you. Get away and tell an adult as soon as possible. Death Eaters are easily recognized when they are ready to attack. They wear long black robes and white masks to hide their identities. When they are alone or doing everyday things, they are only recognizable by the tattoo worn on their forearm. It consists of a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth. No Death Eater will allow you to catch a glimpse of this, so be sure to be vigilant at all times.” Draco paused and glanced at Severus. He knew what mark Severus wore on his arm.

“No worries, there, Draco. I am never in short sleeves.” Snape told the boy. “What else does the paper offer?” He asked, brushing away thoughts of the Dark Mark.

“A story about Fudge and his blunders in office.” Draco said as he flipped through the pages. “Study tips. Umm, jokes. Career advice, mostly about not working for the Ministry. Ads for the Weasleys’ joke shop and some little book store called ‘Arcane’s Archives’.

“The Fudge story, please.” Snape said.

“ ‘Ministry in Chaos – Minister Fudge has proved time and time again that he is untrustworthy in office. He was first warned about Voldemort’s return two years ago when Harry Potter had won the Triwizard Tournament and had seen Voldemort’s resurrection. Fudge refused to believe the evidence put before him and started a smear campaign against Harry Potter in order to discredit his claims of the Dark Lord’s return.

Fudge assigned a High Inquisitor to Hogwarts to ensure that the education we students were receiving was of the best quality. Unfortunately, the High Inquisitor, Dolores Umbridge, did more to hinder her students than help them. She did not teach practical spells and instead set her students to reading everyday in class. She bullied Harry Potter and his friends time and again to convince them that Mr. Potter was lying for attention’s sake. We all know that Harry Potter hates attention of any kind. She was later Headmistress of Hogwarts for a time while Dumbledore was away from school. Students under her care nearly died. Umbridge was removed from her post and currently retains a post by Fudge’s side.

Minister Fudge was late in the game in informing the public of the present dangers involving Voldemort. This calls several things into question: Is he a fit leader for the magical world? How much does he really know, and how much is he telling us? Why is he seeking a visit with Harry Potter? What do his actions mean for the fate of our world?

Mr. Potter was unavailable for comment, though Headmaster Dumbledore did say that Harry Potter did not wish to meet with the Minister, citing schoolwork demands. We all know that Harry Potter

currently is not within the walls of Hogwarts. Where has Dumbledore hidden him?"

"That was Miss Granger in all her glory." Snape commented. "She should be a writer. I wonder how she got all of her information?" He took a sip of his drink. "Anything else?"

"A story about some kid called 'Joseph Cooper'." Draco answered. "It's fiction. There's also a crossword and some kind of word scramble. Horoscopes. A menu for the Great Hall, though how they got that..." Snape cut him off.

"Thank you, Draco. I think we're finished with that." Snape stood and went over to his enchanted windows. "Did they mention anything about the paper being a secret?" He asked.

"They just say that the paper is for students only and that no teacher will be able to read it. They ask their readers not to reveal it to any teacher at Hogwarts." Draco explained to his mentor.

"Yes, well. This is going to turn out like The Quibbler last year when Potter gave that interview." Snape sighed and turned back to Draco. "You should get to bed. I'll let Moody know you are here." Draco nodded and folded the paper. "May I see that?" Snape asked.

"You can't read it." Draco told him. "It's charmed." Draco explained.

"I am aware of that. I just want to see it." Draco handed over the paper and smirked at the doodle of a cauldron exploding and a cartoon of himself started berating the student in the smoke cloud. "Oh, that is definitely Longbottom's doing." He waved Draco off to his room. "Good-night, child." Draco wished him the same and left.

Snape moved to his desk and pulled out a quill. He wrote on the sheet. I don't know what you lot are up to, with these charmed papers, but when I find the artist of this cartoon, I shall give him a firm talking to. He could almost hear the shriek from Gryffindor Tower. He wondered what it would actually sound like.

“Hey, Bug. What’s going on?” Harry asked as he noticed everyone crowding around the main bulletin board. Girls were squealing while boys appeared nervous. A few were making their way towards the girls with slightly confident faces causing quite a commotion in the hallway.

“There’s going to be a Halloween dance on the 31st.” Bug told Harry. “Fancy dress is required, but it sounds like it’s going to be a good time.” Harry paled. A dance? Fancy dress? Oh, this was not good. This sounded like the Yule Ball all over again. “Who would you like to be?” Bug asked him. “I think I’m going to be Chewbacca. Do you think I’m tall enough?” Harry looked Bug over and smiled.

“Maybe if I let you borrow my spy stilts.” Harry said with a slightly mischievous look on his face. “We could work out something. Jack could help us.” Bug shook his head. “What?” Harry asked. “I make a valid suggestion and you stare at me with reproach in your expression.”

Bug snorted and elbowed Harry. “Get out of here, Shakespeare nut. I’ll let you know what I come up with.” Bug walked away, leaving Harry in the hallway. Harry turned towards Paul’s office and froze when he saw several girls gathered and smiling at him. No, that wasn’t right. It had to be someone behind him. Harry glanced behind him. Oh, that’s a wall. He turned back to the girls and felt like Rita Skeeter was bearing down on him. He gave them all a crooked smile. Every girl in the group giggled. Harry decided that only one option was left in this situation. He fled.

Two seconds later found him in Paul’s office, checking behind him for a pack of giggling teenagers. “Buddy? Someone after you?” Paul asked from behind him.

Harry whirled around and had to stop himself from reaching for his wand. “Paul! Don’t do that!” He breathed out a sigh of relief and sank to the floor. Paul raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to laugh at me.” He told Paul.

“I will not.” Paul contradicted as he helped Harry from the floor. “Tell me what’s going on.” Harry eyed him skeptically as he perched on the arm of the sofa. “On the cushions, please.” Harry changed position. “What is it?”

Harry took a deep breath and sighed. “You know the Halloween dance?” Harry asked.

“I know something of it.” Paul answered. “What about it?”

“Well, once all the girls saw the sign, it was like they were everywhere and they started staring at me, giggling, and smiling.” Harry told Paul, hiding his face behind his pillow. “I felt like I was standing in front of a bus that had no brakes.” Paul tried to keep his chuckles in. He really did. This was a boy who had fought for his life on more than one occasion, and now he couldn’t handle girls? “I knew you’d laugh at me.” Harry grumbled.

“I’m sorry, Harry. I am.” Paul said as his laughter died down. “I just find it funny. You’re so mature in some ways, and so innocent in others.” Harry stared at Paul. Did he just say that? “Not innocent in that way, though you’d be a little young.” Paul told him.

“Are you done embarrassing me yet?” Harry asked from behind his pillow.

“I think so.” Paul took Harry’s pillow away so he could see the boy’s face. “So, who are you asking?”

Harry snatched the pillow back. “I thought you said you were done embarrassing me.” Harry complained. Paul only raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. I don’t want to go.”

“I think you do. Come on. Think of what outfit you could wear! What would you disguise yourself as, given the chance?” Harry shrugged. “There must be something you always wanted to be.”

“Normal?” Harry asked. Paul gave him another look. “I didn’t really have a chance to think about it as a kid, alright?” Harry pulled his legs

up and sighed. "I don't know what I would be." Harry stared off into space for a few seconds.

"I think I know what you could be, kid." Harry looked up. "Or should I say, Lord Vader?" Harry raised an eyebrow. "Come on, ultimate bad guy of all time."

"I'm not a bad guy." Harry said in response. "I'm a good guy."

"Which is why Vader is perfect for you. Vader was a good guy in bad guy clothes. Halloween is the one time you can don a disguise and not be stared at. Didn't Hermione's father offer to bring you a Star Wars costume once?" Paul asked.

"I don't want to be a burden." Harry told Paul. "He's busy."

"Well, a phone call wouldn't hurt." Paul picked up the receiver and wiggled it in Harry's direction. "Come on. The worst he could do is say no."

Harry glared at Paul, but reached out and took the hand piece. "Alright. Could you dial her number?" Paul punched in the number, smiling all the while. Harry found that Hermione's father was more excited about the chance to help than Harry had expected. "He'll be here this Thursday afternoon with a few different costumes, in case I change my mind about Darth Vader. He whispered through part of the conversation."

"He was probably hiding from his wife. Men do that sometimes." Paul explained. Hermione had told him about her mother threatening her father over the Star Wars costumes. "So, who are you going to ask?" Harry shrugged at Paul's question. "There must be some girl you like?" He prodded.

"I don't know any of them very well." Harry responded. "I've got to think about it." Harry explained. "It's just, why do they always have to move in packs?" Harry asked.

“Girl survival mode. I’m still trying to figure that out. If you find out, could you clue me in?” Harry stared at Paul’s question. Why in the world would Paul want to know something like that?

“Right. Are we done with the embarrassing talk yet?” Harry pleaded. “Please?”

Paul chuckled. “Yes, we’re done. Don’t you have play practice now?” Harry eyes grew wide and Paul smiled as Harry bade him a quick good-bye and the boy ran out of the room and down the hallway. He turned back to his progress report on Harry.

Patient seems to be adjusting more and more as time goes on. He is finally starting to act as a normal teenager with the normal worries involved with those years. There is a school dance coming up at the end of the month. Harry has expressed some worry about the dance, mainly the date part of it. Harry has not had a much experience with this part of being a teenager as he has been too busy fighting for his life instead of learning about girls and dating. I have advised him the best I could, but this can only be learned by doing it. I only hope I will be able to help him with the hormones when they finally start raging.

“No, Evan. Stop.” Harry’s face fell as Professor Bevington stopped him in the middle of his speech. “Your phrasing is perfect, the words flow, but you’re not quite into his character.” Harry sank onto the stage and groaned. He had everything down but maintaining his character and the performance was just two weeks away! He needed to get this down. He was fine one minute and out of character the next. “You need to remember why Edmund is like he is.” Professor Bevington told him. “He is a bastard child. His parents were not married when he was born, and now he is marked for life.” Harry’s hand rose to his scar and rubbed. He could almost identify with that. “Edmund is treated differently for something over which he has no control: His parents’ actions. Now, everyone treats him differently. He is not normal. He operates outside society, no matter how much he wants in.”

“It’s horrible, having your parents’ actions on you like that. He couldn’t help what his parents did.” Harry said in a whisper. “I’m not

responsible for it. I didn't do it!" He looked up to see his teacher smiling down at him.

"That's it! That's it exactly! That is his attitude. He feels that he should not be responsible for his parents' actions, and now he is taking steps to ensure that he gets what he feels he deserves. Ever do anything like that?" Bevington asked.

"Yes, I did. I think I can do it now." He thought of not returning to Hogwarts and staying where he wanted to stay. He deserved this year. It felt good to be away from the fame and fawning of the magical world. He wasn't responsible for it; why should he be honored when it was his mother's work? Harry stood again and brought all of those familiar feelings to the front. He waited until Professor Bevington motioned for him to start. " 'Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law/My services are bound. Wherefore should I/Stand in the plague of custom, and permit/The curiosity of nations to deprive me/For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines/Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?" Harry ran through the entire soliloquy and smiled when Bevington started clapping at the end.

"Perfect! Now, just make sure you do that when we open, alright?" Harry nodded and moved off the stage. "Regan, Goneril, Cordelia! I need you three out here!" Three girls moved onto the stage. "All right, girls, Act one, Scene one, starting with 'The jewels of our father'."

"Evan!" Harry jumped at the voice and turned to see Julie hurrying up to him. "We've got your costume ready. We need you to try it on so we can make any adjustments you might need." Harry followed her back to the costuming section of the theater.

"Did you find him?" A girl asked as Julie entered the room. "Oh, good!" She said once she saw Harry behind her. "Go try this on." She thrust a costume at him.

"Calm down, Sarah. It's not like he was hiding from us on purpose." Harry went into a dressing room Julie motioned him towards and locked the door behind him. He pulled on the costume and looked at

himself in the mirror. He had thought that he would end up in tights (he had not been happy about that idea), but the costumes were creative in that they looked old and contemporary at the same time. He wanted to laugh as he saw the latest addition. It looked like a wizarding robe from Madame Malkins' shop, just cut differently and gathered in places, without sleeves. It actually reminded him of the garments Lockhart was so fond of in his second year. He shuddered. A banging on the door startled him from his thoughts.

"I know it doesn't take you that long to get dressed everyday! Get out here!" Harry had little doubts as to why Sarah was called the "Cutter of the Costumes." Harry opened the door and stepped out. All of the girls froze.

"What?" Harry asked, as he looked himself over. "I put it on right, didn't I?" Sarah sighed and pushed Harry towards the mirrors.

"Don't mind them. You're the first person to look comfortable in our designs. No one has liked the cape at all." She told him. "On the stool please." Harry stepped onto the stool and Sarah buzzed around him. "The cut is perfect." She said. "Shrug your shoulders, please." Harry did as she asked. "Good." Harry held still as she put her hands up to his shoulders. "Let's slide this off." Harry shrugged off the cape as Julie came up behind him.

"You look great, Evan." Harry smiled at her and thanked her.

"Where did you get these designs?" He asked as Sarah motioned for him to put on the cape again.

"From a book." Sarah answered. "Are your shoe sizes accurate?" She asked from the shoe cases.

"Yes, they are." Harry did not want to antagonize the Cutter. Sarah dug into the trunk and pulled out a box.

"Try these on." She said. "Then we'll know if we have to hem your pants or not." Harry pulled on the boots she had handed him and

turned at request. "They need hemmed just a bit. Up on the stool, please." Harry obeyed and waited for her to measure.

"Where's my Edmund?" He heard Professor Bevington's voice drawing nearer. "Edmund!" Harry started to step off the stool, but Sarah's glare kept him in place. "Oh my goodness! Wonderful!" Harry looked up to see his drama teacher standing in the doorway. "Costumers, that is just wonderful!" The entire costuming crew grinned at the praise. "How long do you need Edmund?" He asked.

"Just a few seconds more. We need to hem these pants." Sarah said from the floor. "Don't you dare grow until this play is over!" She ordered Harry.

"I'll try not to." Harry promised. "I'll be out as soon as Sarah is done with me, sir." Harry promised. Professor Bevington nodded and moved back to the stage area.

"That's not professional!" He wailed at some boys playing with the props. "Boys!" Harry smiled at his teacher and shook his head.

"Don't fidget." Sarah snapped at him. Harry held still until she told him he could move. He dashed back into the dressing room and changed his clothes, hanging the costume with the most care he could manage. He handed it back to Julie and left the backstage area.

"Evan!" Professor Bevington waved to him from the last row. Harry went to meet him. "You and Allen practice your lines together. Then we'll see your duel." Harry nodded and sat down next to his "brother".

"Hey, Evan. Last scene okay with you?" Harry nodded and smiled as Allen started reciting his lines. Harry loved the theater. He only hoped that everything went well. He pushed his thoughts of the impending dance away and recited his own line in response to Allen. This, he could do.

Dumbledore sat in his office, staring into space as he pondered his never-ending failure to retrieve Harry Potter from his relatives. The wards repelled him from Privet Drive, and any wizard or witch spent

the better part of an hour trying to convince the wards to allow them through to the house. Once they reached the house, if they did, they had to battle against two rather stubborn and vehement Muggles. Harry had always given an impression of disliking his relatives and had said as much on more than one occasion. Why would the wards become so powerful? He, Albus Dumbledore, had set the wards! They should listen to him. Why did they change?

Dumbledore had reverted to the only course he could take in light of his new found knowledge of the strength of the wards. He had contacted a retired member of the Order to have him research every Muggle boarding school in England to see if he could locate Harry. It didn't seem like Harry was able to leave on his own free will. That, or his aunt held something over him, leaving Harry to choose between two unsavory options should Harry take it upon himself to leave the boarding school she had chosen. Whatever the reason, Harry could not return to the magical world on his own power. Therefore, the magical world must find him and bring him home.

Dumbledore looked up when the gargoyle alerted him to his visitor. Ah, Remus had already arrived! Excellent. "Come in, Remus." He called to the werewolf as the man raised a hand to knock on the door. The wolf had taken most of Remus' vitality, but Dumbledore held hope that having such a purpose would restore some life to the man. The boy liked Remus, after all, and Remus was fond of Harry. The door opened to reveal a tired werewolf leaning on his cane.

"You wished to see me?" Remus sank into a chair as Dumbledore poured out tea and passed a cup to Remus.

"Yes, Remus, I did." Dumbledore started. "I have a bit of a mission for you, should you wish to accept it." Remus gave him an interested look. The DADA professor was still there, then, and wishing for action. "I need your help in finding Harry."

"Harry is still missing?" Remus gave a worried frown at Dumbledore. "I thought you knew where he was." He said as he sipped his tea.

“We know that he is in England, at a Muggle boarding school. Which one or where, well, that’s a different matter.” Dumbledore explained. “I need an extra man on the search team to look for Harry.” Dumbledore pulled out a large list. “I have found that the Muggles have a lot of boarding schools, Remus, a rather large number, in fact. The other professors and I are going to start searching the schools, one by one, until we find Harry.” Dumbledore told him. “I’m sure that Harry will be more inclined to come forward with you on the team.” Dumbledore motioned to the list. “The first school is very close to Privet Drive, and it branches out from there. I hope to have Harry back with us soon.”

“Of course I’ll help you.” Remus told Dumbledore. “I’ve been waiting for an assignment from you for a long time, Headmaster.” Remus took the offered list and skimmed it, looking to see if St. Jude’s was mentioned at all. No. Someone else must have it.

“Excellent. The next meeting is tomorrow evening, at 7:00 pm.” Dumbledore wrote out the time on a slip of parchment. “I’ll see you in the Great Hall then.” Remus nodded and hobbled out on his cane, clutching the list and parchment. He knew that Dumbledore had not given him the whole list of schools. There had to be more than that in England. That meant another had the name of Harry’s school. He hurried out of the school and to the gate so he could Apparate. He only hoped that Harry would like a surprise visit.

Author’s Note: Okay, gang. That’s it for now. I hope you all liked it. We’re moving right along. I can’t wait to get to what happens next, because Harry finds out about – never mind! I almost let it slip! ;) You’ll have to wait until the next chapter. I won’t give a date, because I truly don’t know when that will be. I’ll try to make it soon, but I can’t guarantee it. (Sniff, sniff) I have another paper due next week, German this time, so I’ll let you know how that goes, as well. The better my grades are, the more I let myself write. Talk to you all later!

Author's Note: Here we go again! Thanks for all your encouragement and reviews! I loved getting them.

“Mail call!” Harry’s homeroom teacher called out. Harry ignored him as he had since Hermione had returned to Hogwarts and they had started writing via the Mini-Messengers. “Evan James!” A letter? Harry stood up, received his letter from his teacher, and sat back down at his desk to read it. They still had ten minutes left in homeroom before classes actually started. He loved being in regular classes. He only met with Sky two nights a week now, just to make sure that he was on track and not falling behind his classmates through some deficiency of his “gifted” education. Sky did not hold a very high opinion of Evan James’s previous school.

Harry blinked at the letter he held in his hands. It was from Dudley. He remembered that Dudley had asked if the two could write to each other, but Harry had forgotten amid all of the other stuff he had had going on at the time. Dudley had not written much and what was there was enough to make Harry confused. What did Dudley want from him?

Dear Harry,

I guess that you didn’t want to write to me. Mum said I should be patient because we’ve done a lot to you and it will take time, even if you do decide to try to like us like we are trying to like you. Mum said it was up to you. I just have a question and I would like an answer, even if it is one word. You can pass it through Mum if you don’t want to write to me. Do you hate me?

Dudley

Harry stopped and scratched his head. He had never heard such an odd question, and the wizarding world had quite a few of them whenever they managed to corner him in one place long enough to ask. Did he hate Dudley? He should, considering what Dudley had managed to do to him over the years. “Harry Hunting” rose to his mind, but he couldn’t find the usual feelings that he had had about it when he was a child. He didn’t feel much of anything, really. They had been kids. It was stupid, really. Dudley had been a right prat

about a lot of stuff, but that didn't mean that Harry hated him. Or did it?

Harry tried to figure out if he hated anyone. Lucius Malfoy rose to his mind, but the feelings quickly died away. The same happened with Bellatrix Lestrange, though it took a bit longer. Pettigrew might work for hate. Dumbledore? No. Dementors. Harry gave a light shiver. Okay, he hated dementors, but he couldn't find any feelings the same way towards Dudley. It didn't make sense. Harry gathered his books and told the teacher he needed to see Paul. His professor nodded and shooed Harry out of the room. Harry showed up at Paul's office to find Paul missing. Zen, however, was not and seemed more than thrilled to see Harry.

"My lightning child has returned!" Zen hissed happily. "Take me out?" Harry smiled and dropped his backpack onto the floor. He went over to the cage and lowered an arm so that Zen could crawl up. The snake hissed his satisfaction and curled around Harry's arm. "What troubles you, my lightning child?" Zen asked as he blinked red eyes up at Harry.

"It's nothing, really. I'm just confused." Harry answered him as he lay down on the couch and settled Zen on his stomach. He ran a finger down Zen's body. Zen closed his eyes in pleasure and asked Harry to explain his confusion. "I received a letter from my cousin Dudley. He asked if I hate him. I don't know if I do." Harry explained the best he could. He wasn't sure if Zen understood.

"For whom do you have feelings of hate?" Zen asked. Harry frowned and shrugged.

"No one, really. I hate dementors because they affect me more than they should. I hate when people stare at me because of my scar and treat me differently from everyone else." Harry shuddered when he thought of Fudge's fluctuating attitudes towards him from year three onward. He wondered if Fudge knew he was missing. He made a mental note to write Hermione tonight.

“You know what hatred feels like. Do you hate this Dudley person?” Zen asked as he curled up and opened his eyes.

“I guess I don’t. It’s not hate I’m feeling. I just can’t identify what I am feeling!” Harry rubbed his eyes, swore as he tried to fix his contact lens, and sighed with frustration. “I’m just so, just so...”

“Angry?” Zen suggested in a nonchalant way as he curled about himself.

“Yes! I’m so angry at him for what he used to do! How he used to treat me when we were younger.” Harry sat up, making Zen hiss in displeasure as he was forced to change position. Harry punched the couch and growled. “That’s exactly what I’m feeling! I’m so mad at him!”

“Upset, Harry?” Paul asked from the doorway. Harry looked up, slightly embarrassed that Paul had seen him in a temper.

“No.” He answered. Zen hissed at him, starting to lecture that Harry should release some of these feelings to another human and not keep them to himself. Harry returned Zen to his cage by way of answer.

“Just you wait until I get out of here! You’re in for a world of hurt!” Zen promised Harry from his cage.

“Get a number! You’ll only be number twenty-three. Think you can wait that long?” Harry hissed back at him.

“Are you and Zen fighting?” Paul asked, completely perplexed. It seemed so odd to hear hissing that sounded angry, though how Paul could even tell it was angry was beyond the man’s reasoning capability of the moment.

“No!” Harry snapped. He saw Paul’s face and regretted his actions. Back, anger, back!

“I’m not sure what has you so upset, or what you and Zen were saying, but I did not appreciate being snapped at.” Paul told Harry as he took his chair. Harry sank down on the couch and hid his face behind his hands.

“I’m sorry, Paul.” He said as he tried to work out the mess his mind was in about Dudley. “I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m just confused.” Paul raised an eyebrow and waited for Harry to continue. “My cousin sent me a letter.” Harry told Paul. Paul nodded and dug into his mini fridge and offered Harry a bottle of juice. Harry took it and set it next to him. “He asked if I hated him.”

“Do you?” Paul asked. This was something about his family! Something Harry had hesitated speaking about and he could now be ready to talk about it was now finally mentioned.

“No.” Harry answered in a small voice. “That’s what Zen and I were talking about. He helped me figure it out. I don’t hate him. I’m just really, really mad at him.” Harry explained. “Furious.” Harry’s hands clenched into fists and he sighed.

“Why?” The simple question struck Harry like a whip between the eyes. Harry stood and went over to the window. He stared out at the changing leaves and frowned. A thousand things flashed through his mind as to why he was so upset with his cousin. He was unsure if he could tell Paul all he wanted to say. It would be too hard to say it all. It hurt just thinking about it. He wished he could just show Paul what he went through. Harry took a few deep breaths to calm himself. Each breath seemed only to fuel his anger. He didn’t see Zen curl up on his heated rock or whisper that he was cold.

“Buddy?” Paul put out a hand and turned Harry around. Harry looked up into Paul’s eyes. Paul saw the pain there from whatever his cousin had done. “What do you need to tell me?” Something happened in that instant, as though permission of some kind had been given to Harry. It was like a slide show was being played right in front of his eyes. He saw images of a rather large blond boy tormenting a child at least three times smaller than him. He figured that the larger boy was Dudley, while the little one was...Harry! What

was he seeing? More importantly, how? Several more images flashed in front of his eyes before he felt a small pushing sensation just behind his eyes. He blinked and the images were gone. Strange.

A shuddering breath brought him back to himself. He looked down to find Harry on his knees and hugging himself around the shoulders. He was taking deep, heaving breaths. Paul gasped when he felt the cold air surrounding him and he realized that he could see Harry's breath in the air. He dropped to a knee and gathered Harry in his arms. "It's okay, Harry. It's okay." He whispered to the shaking boy. Harry only shook his head and shut his eyes against the sunlight pouring in through the window. "It's okay."

"Why did he have to hurt me?" Harry whispered as he fought for control of his own body. What was happening? "I tried to be nice to him! He called me names and made sure I couldn't make any friends at school! He made me do his homework. He hurt me." Paul stayed quiet. What could he say? The other boy was a bully, through and through. He didn't blame Harry for feeling the way he did. "I just wanted to be his cousin and he stepped all over me. Family." Harry's fists clenched again as he worked up into a temper again. "He hurt me. Why? What did I ever do to him?" Paul knew that Harry had just asked a rhetorical question and did not require an answer.

Paul held Harry until his breathing softened to light tears that just fell from his eyes. The cold started to disappear as Harry fought to control himself. "Let it out, kiddo. You're allowed to be upset and you're allowed to be angry. It's okay to feel this way." Harry nodded against Paul's shoulder and took a deep breath. He rested against Paul for a few seconds before pulling away.

"I think I'm okay, now." He told Paul as he sat up. "Thanks."

"Still angry?" Paul asked. He opened Harry's juice and handed it to him, motioning that Harry should drink some of it. Harry took a long drink from the bottle and nodded.

“Still angry.” Harry agreed as he wiped his face. “It’s more manageable now.” Harry explained. “Smaller, somehow.” Paul smiled and nodded. “I think I know what to tell him.”

“Good. Make sure you tell him that you’re angry with him. You two will not be able to have a good relationship, or a relationship of any kind, without you telling him your feelings and vice versa.” Paul motioned for Harry to drink more.

“I’m supposed to tell him that?” Harry snorted. “Dudley won’t take that well.” Harry took another sip of his juice.

“Yes, well, if he wants you as a friend, he’ll learn to live with it.” Paul stood up and helped Harry to his feet. “It looks like Zen is very upset with you.” Harry looked at the cage with a regretful smile. “I think that the offer of a mouse will cheer him up.”

“Really?” Harry asked. Paul only took out a small box and handed it to Harry by way of response. Harry opened the cage and smiled down at Zen.

“I’m waiting for my number to come up.” If snakes could sniff in disdain at someone, Zen managed to do so at Harry. The boy smiled down at his reptilian friend.

“I wanted to apologize.” Harry told the snake. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.” Zen pretended to ignore Harry. “I have a mouse for you.” Zen’s red eye looked up at Harry. It seemed like all could be fixed with an offer of a mouse.

“A mouse?” He asked in an excited voice. “Really?” Harry opened the box and released the mouse into the cage.

“Please don’t eat it in front of me.” Harry said as he replaced the cage’s lid. Paul slid a cloth over the cage and whispered ‘just in case’.

“Here mousey, mousey, mousey!”

Harry was struggling to stay awake through his Charms assignment. Yes, he knew that animation spells were an important set of spells in many different ways, but he couldn't quite drum up the enthusiasm he needed to complete the essay. Animation charms seemed so empty after facing Voldemort. Heck, everything seemed pointless after facing Voldemort. His eyes drifted shut of their own accord and his head slowly came to rest on his desk.

(Dream)

"Where have you been?" Voldemort demanded. Harry opened his eyes and fought to keep from cringing at the anger in Voldemort's voice. He hoped that he would make it out of this dream alive. He pushed himself up from the ground and stood.

"I didn't have a choice." Harry said as he faced Voldemort. "They've been drugging me. I just happened to fall asleep before the evening meds came around." Voldemort seemed to be considering what Harry had said.

"The Muggle teachers are drugging you?" Voldemort asked, looking at Harry in a speculating way. He waved his wand and the fireplace in the room lit up.

"My nightmares 'disturb the other students'." He spat out and folded his arms. Harry worked up some temper to go into his voice. He was an actor and he needed to convince Voldemort that he was angry about his treatment at the hands of his Muggle teachers. "Now they shove pills down my throat every night to make sure I don't dream." Harry rubbed his face and sighed. "I tried to tell them that I would be fine and that I didn't want them, but they don't listen to me. I don't have much of a choice."

"Need I remind you of our agreement?" Voldemort hissed at Harry. Harry didn't need to be reminded. He knew what Voldemort was capable of and how far he was willing to go. They had an unspoken truce. Harry would submit to Voldemort's lessons, and Voldemort would leave Harry's friends alone...for now. Harry could live with the

arrangement, though he didn't like it at all. Making a deal with Voldemort was like making a deal with the forces of nature. You never knew what would happen. He had gotten himself into this and he thought that he might learn something useful to defeat Voldemort. He hadn't counted on Voldemort blackmailing him into complete lessons.

"No, sir." Harry answered. "I'll figure out a way to avoid the medicine." He promised. In truth, he had not taken a sleeping pill for a few weeks now, ever since Sensei had induced the mother of all Occlumency lessons without knowing it. If Voldemort was willing to believe that Harry had not been absent by choice, then Harry was willing to let him believe that. Voldemort eyed him, but accepted the statement at face value.

"Very well, let's begin. Wand out." Harry pulled out his wand and held it up. "I believe you are ready to start wordless spells. No words are needed in this kind of magic. You just think of it. Do not say any spell." Harry nodded and noticed that a table and chairs appeared beside him. Voldemort produced a feather and set it on the table. "Let's start small. Levitate the feather. No spells." Voldemort took his own seat and Harry sat down across from him. He could do this, right?

Harry had learned a few things about Voldemort during these little lessons. He had the same amount of patience Snape possessed with his students and enjoyed berating Harry almost as much as Snape did. He also truly enjoyed teaching, as he became more and more excited as Harry continued to achieve the goals to which he set Harry every time they met. He held back nothing in the way of punishment if Harry failed, but his praise for succeeding almost made up for his cruelty. Almost. Harry continued to heal himself through his wandless magic, but he was becoming unable to heal all of his injuries right away. Either that, or Voldemort was taking out his own frustrations from the Diagon Alley fiasco on Harry.

It was through these lessons that he was beginning to understand why some would find Voldemort an enticing leader to follow. His praise was rare, but when it did happen, it gave one such a feeling of

pride in succeeding for such a demanding taskmaster. It was intoxicating, an almost heady experience in knowing that one had been pushed to the limits time and again and continued to exceed those limits.

Harry raised his wand and pointed it at the feather, trying to get it to levitate. *Wingardium Leviosa*. He thought inside his head. Nothing happened. A quick peep at Voldemort revealed that the man was extremely impatient tonight. *Wingardium Leviosa*. Nope. This was not good. He closed his eyes and focused for a few seconds, picturing the feather rising from the table. He pointed his wand again and opened his eyes in time to see the feather lift from the table. "That's it!" Voldemort slapped the table. "You've done it."

Harry stared at the feather in wonder. Had he really done what Voldemort wanted him to do? He noticed that Voldemort seemed to be waiting for something. Harry allowed the feather to falter, though he felt that he could hold it up all night. He didn't want to succeed too far too fast. A major part of this game was convincing Voldemort that Harry had no extraordinary ability at all, that he was just an average kid thrown into odd circumstances through the meddling of others and some luck. The first lesson had been a sort of fluke, and Voldemort had told Harry, when questioned about the bright light, that magic sometimes fluctuated and it was nothing to worry about since it had not happened again. Harry had not duplicated the target color white since then, but when he was in his own mental room away from Voldemort, he had accomplished it every time with little effort. Harry still didn't know what the color meant, but he could still produce the same color, only it was increasing in brightness and intensity. His targets were not standing up to the treatment very well at all. He wondered what it meant.

His feather wavered in the air, probably a result of his thoughts, before drifting down to the lacquered tabletop. "How are you feeling?" Harry's head snapped up at the question. Voldemort never inquired as to his state of health without an ulterior motive. The man was a Slytherin, after all, and he used every bit of information to plan. Harry decided to answer truthfully.

“I’m a little tired.” He said. It was true. These lessons always exhausted him and he had been tired to begin with.

“That’s to be expected. You just accomplished some very advanced magic.” Voldemort explained patiently. Harry felt like he was talking to a psycho Remus Lupin as he talked about the Patronus. “The fatigue disappears with practice. The better you become, the less likely you are to become tired.” Harry nodded and yawned a bit. “Did you hear about Diagon Alley?” Voldemort asked conversationally.

“No.” Harry answered. He knew what Voldemort was talking about. He just didn’t want to admit it. “Did something happen?” It was best to sound concerned. The magical world was Harry’s home too.

“Something happened to all of my followers, well, save Pettigrew and one other. He reported that something happened and froze all of my Death Eaters and that was all he could tell me.” Voldemort stared at the fireplace in the room. “The person responsible will find out why I am so feared when I find him.” Voldemort swore. Harry thought of a question to sidetrack Voldemort’s thoughts. He did not want to deal with a Dark Lord bent on vengeance.

“Why do wizards use a wand? If we can do wordless spells, why do we need the wand?” Voldemort gave Harry a suspicious glance before deciding that the question had merit.

“Wands help to focus our power. Wandless casters are very rare. I believe Dumbledore is able to do one or two spells without his wand. Children do accidental magic in our world without a wand. The difference between the two is the latter is not controlled at all, while the former is heavily controlled. No one is able to function completely without a wand. If we just did wordless spells, without the wand, the spells would react much like a child’s accidental magic. The magic would do what it wanted without the focus.” Harry nodded to show he understood and made a mental pact with himself that Voldemort would not find out about either Bley’s book or Harry’s wandless talent. Harry had learned one main thing from Voldemort that he applied at every session: Do not give up any advantages you have over your adversary. “You look exhausted.” Voldemort waved his wand and

incanted a sleep spell. "I'll see you soon." Harry faded away back to his room.

(end dream)

He jerked awake, amazed that he had escaped without a single curse. He counted his lucky stars that he been looking out for him today and turned back to his essay. He wanted to finish it before his session with his aunt today.

Harry reached up to knock on Paul's door when he heard Joe's voice coming from the corridor. What were they already doing here? Aunt Petunia and Joe weren't due to show up until later. Harry checked his watch and sighed. Oh, they were due now. "Petunia, I keep telling you. He is not going to start responding for quite a while. You hurt him as child. You pushed him away repeatedly when he needed an adult. He will just not accept you without the same number, if not more, repetitions that you do want him. You're going to have to be patient." Harry knocked on the door hurriedly and entered when Paul answered.

"I've been here for a few minutes." Harry told him as he tossed his backpack in the corner and went over to Zen's cage. Paul only raised an eyebrow as Harry took Zen out of the snake's cage and started to chat.

"Hello, Harry! What is troubling you?" Zen asked as Harry settled on the couch. "You have a glum look about you, and I can smell it." Zen gave a rather intense stare for a snake.

"Zen, what would you do if someone told you that you were not wanted your entire life, and then changed their minds and said that they did want you?" Harry asked. The door opened and Joe stepped in, only to step out immediately. Harry smirked.

"I would wonder why they changed their minds. Do you know why?" Zen asked as he curled around Harry's hand and sighed as Harry started petting him. Paul looked at the closed door and then back at

Harry as though he was asking why Harry had not returned Zen to his cage.

“Yes, I do.” Harry told the snake.

“Your aunt?” Harry nodded. “You must forget the past. She wants to care for you now. Allow her.” Harry sighed and stroked Zen again.

“Hey, buddy?” Harry looked up at Paul. “Joe really wants to come in, but Zen scares him. Mind putting him away?” Harry nodded, got up from the couch, and went over to Zen’s cage.

“Sorry.” Harry said as he put Zen back down in his cage. “I just needed to talk with him for a second.”

“I understand. Anything you need to talk about before Joe and your aunt come in?” Paul asked as Harry took a seat on the couch and pulled his legs up. Insecure and confused stance. This was not good.

“Yes. No.” Harry answered. “I don’t know. There’s something. Nothing.” He shrugged. “Maybe later.” Harry said. Paul nodded and called Joe in.

“Hello, Harry.” Joe greeted. Harry gave him a smile.

“Hello, Harry.” Petunia said. Harry regarded her for a few seconds before nodding towards her.

“Okay, let’s get started. Do we need to review the rules?” Paul asked as Harry rearranged himself into a more contract ball. Paul reached out and pulled Harry’s feet down to the ground. Harry glared at him. He had been comfortable in that position, thank you very much!

“No, I remember them.” Petunia answered. Harry nodded to show that he remembered the rules. He started to draw his feet up, but Paul stopped him with a quick hand on his shin. Harry sighed and pulled his pillow towards him. Paul snatched it away and tossed it into

the corner. Harry would have to walk between Joe and Petunia to retrieve his pillow. He missed the look Joe and Paul shared while he was contemplating how to get his pillow back.

“All right, let’s get started.” Joe said. “We talked about the rules you set for Harry when he was younger. Harry, why don’t you tell us a few rules you would have liked to see.” Harry was still in the middle of figuring out how to retrieve his pillow. He tried to pull his feet up, but Paul stopped him again. What was this, plot against Harry day? His frustration snapped and he threw out a hand and summoned the pillow. Paul frowned, Petunia jumped, while Joe fell out of his chair.

“Didn’t I tell you that I didn’t want you to do any more wandless magic until you’ve figured out the parameters of your abilities?” Paul asked, but more like demanded. Harry hugged the pillow to himself.

“I did figure it out. I’m fine.” Paul took a deep breath before talking again.

“How?” Paul asked. Harry dug out Bleys’ book and handed it to Paul. “What is this written in?” He asked.

“Parseltongue.” Harry answered. Paul looked through the book before shaking his head.

“I don’t want you doing wandless magic right now.” Paul told Harry. Harry stared at Paul before jumping up and grabbing his backpack. “Harry!” Harry stormed out of the office and down the hallway. He saw Paul come out after him. Harry did the only thing he could do: he ran. He told the attendant where he was going and headed out into the little wood that ran along one side of the property. He adjusted his backpack and climbed a tree in the middle of the trees. Paul wouldn’t look up, would he? Harry reached the highest safe looking branch and curled up on it. He drew out Bleys’ book and opened it.

Concern yourself with neither the past nor the future. Focus only on the present. The past shaped you, but it does not control who you are or of what you are able. The past will control you only if you allow it. Focus only on the present. The future changes with each passing

moment. Moment to moment – who knows what the future holds? You cannot control it. Focus only on the present.

He closed the book and drew his legs up. He shut his eyes and leaned his head back against the trunk of the tree. Why was everything so weird? He had thought that he knew where he stood. Now, he wasn't too sure. He wondered if it would just be easier to go back to the magical world. All it would take was one simple spell with his wand. Wizards would show up so fast that he wouldn't have time to change his mind. He could go back where he belonged and he would be safe from Voldemort at Hogwarts. Why had he made this choice? Had he even been thinking at all when he made this decision?

He pulled out his Mini-Messenger and said the password.

-Mi? Are you there? I think I've made a horrible mistake. I want to come back to school. I don't want to be here anymore. I did wandless magic in front of Paul and he got really upset with me and said he didn't want me doing wandless magic. I thought he would understand! He always seemed fascinated when I spoke Parseltongue, but he didn't like the wandless magic. Why? He...he...doesn't understand!

Harry closed the book and sighed as his head came to rest on his knees. He didn't know how long he sat there until his breathing calmed down and those little water things (he refused to name them so that he could pretend it didn't happen) finished falling from his eyes. He sat up and let his legs dangle. He almost fell from his branch when he heard the telltale sound of someone Apparating. Remus wouldn't Apparate here. He usually took the bus or a taxi. Who was it?

A familiar face had Harry clinging to the trunk and trying to blend in with the foliage in his blue shirt. The Hogwarts Potions Master stepped through the parking lot and onto the grounds of St. Jude's Academy.

Author's Note: Should I hide now?

Author's Note: Hi. (meek wave) I received all of your reviews (death threats) and decided that it was horribly unfair to leave you on a cliffhanger. (glances behind her at the torches and pitchforks) So, in light of this, here is the next installment. I hope you all enjoy.

"I told you he wasn't ready yet." Paul told Joe as the pair of them rushed down the hallway after Harry. Paul shook his head and looked around for his patient. He had expected something of an emotional reaction, but not this running away. He and Harry had talked about barriers earlier that week. It seemed like Harry was just not ready to give them up.

"I didn't think that he would react in such a way to the presence of his aunt." Joe said as he and Paul turned the corner. The two therapists and Petunia had talked about how they were going to break down some of Harry's barriers since he wasn't opening up like he should. In fact, both Joe and Paul had noticed the boy withdrawing. Breaking one barrier would give them a foothold they desperately needed. "I thought he would trust her enough to at least walk near her!" Paul and Joe looked down two separate hallways to see if they could find Harry. "Let's check his room." Paul nodded and pointed to the stairs.

"You know what this means?" Paul asked as he climbed to the third floor.

"We're going to have to start having more than one session a week if we want them to get anywhere." Joe answered, puffing behind Joe on the stairs. He needed to work out more often. "He's not in his room." Joe said as he checked the room. Paul slid past him and looked under the bed, in the closet, and the bathroom, especially behind the shower curtain.

"Where could he have gone?" Paul asked the air around him. Joe jumped and started for the door.

"Sensei!" He threw over his shoulder. Paul considered it. Harry could definitely be with the man as he seemed to feel very safe near the taciturn instructor. He had found Harry just sitting in Sensei's

office more than once. They reached the gym only to groan in disappointment. Harry was not there, and Sensei had not seen him.

“Deshi is missing?” He asked once he saw the frantic faces.

“We think he is somewhere in the school.” Paul told him. “He was a trifle upset.” Sensei’s eyes narrowed and his face blanked. If Paul hadn’t seen Harry do the same thing before the kid had met Sensei, he would have sworn that Sensei had passed on that particular trait. Maybe Harry had shown Sensei how to do it?

“If you have hurt deshi...” Sensei trailed off as he went through the door, his voice promising methods of pain Paul never wanted to experience. “Deshi likes to be alone. Checked his room?”

“Just now.” Paul answered. Sensei merely grunted.

“You, the theater.” Sensei told Paul. “You, the art room.” He told Joe. “I will look in the library. Meet in the main stairwell afterwards, with or without the boy.” He ordered. Joe and Paul scampered off to follow their instructions. They needed to find Harry.

Harry clung to his tree, trying to figure out what he should do. Snape was right there. He could catch the man, and even though Snape did not like him, he would take Harry back to Hogwarts, no questions asked. He waited too long. Snape disappeared into the building, leaving Harry in the tree and alone with his thoughts. If he wanted to go back to Hogwarts, why had he hesitated when Snape appeared? Why didn’t he show himself, instead of staying in the tree? Why was he so confused? He leaned his head back against the tree and smirked a bit as he remembered his rule from childhood. They never look up. He knew that Paul was probably looking and he knew he should go back, but he knew Petunia could handle herself if she did see Snape. The man wouldn’t stand a chance against her.

“Harry?” Harry opened his eyes and looked down to see his aunt standing beneath his tree. “Will you come down, please?” She asked. Harry rubbed his eyes, cursed as his contact slipped, and sighed.

“How did you know where I was?” he asked. The contact finally slid back into place and he blinked a few times. Petunia gave him an odd look before giving him what Harry called her ‘I raised you’ smile.

“You always ended in trees when you were younger.” She told him.

“Only because Dudley chased me up them.” He snapped at her, a little of his anger from before coming to the surface.

“Point.” She told him. “Dudley, however, was always jealous of your ability to climb trees.” She said. Harry shifted his position so that he could dangle from the branch and look at her at the same time. She stared up at him with an odd look. “Please come down.” Harry secured his book bag and slid down the branches until he came to the last one (He had no idea how he had even made it up to the branch to climb the tree) and dropped down.

“I’m down.” He told her, holding out his arms to his sides, as though he was trying to say ‘here I am, now what?’

“Thank you.” She said. Harry nodded. Well, this is kind of awkward. “I just want you to know that the pillow was my idea.” He eyed her in a ‘so what?’ way.

“Why?” He asked. He leaned back against the tree, one foot actually on the trunk and the other on the ground. He crossed his arms and stared her down.

“Barriers.” Harry understood what she meant by that. He, Paul and Joe had addressed that topic several times.

“I like my barriers where they are, thank you.” He told her evenly. “Please stay away from them.” Harry wondered when would be a good time to tell her that Snape had entered the school building. More importantly, how had Petunia come out without Snape seeing her?

“I understand that, dear.” Harry froze at the term of endearment from his aunt. That just wasn’t supposed to happen. Had he slipped into an alternate universe? “Let’s take a walk?” She gestured towards the trees. Harry extended his senses, but felt nothing. There were no malicious intentions in the suggestion of a walk. He liked being outside. This could work. He nodded and fell into step with his aunt, always keeping two feet of distance between the two of them. He could run if need be, but then his aunt had never really hurt him beyond the smack of a hand for getting into something he wasn’t supposed to be into. True, he had more of them than Dudley, but even Dudley’s hand had been smacked once or twice while they were growing up. They walked in silence for a while. Harry wasn’t about to make the first move here.

“Perhaps we’ve been going about everything the wrong way.” Petunia mused aloud. Harry didn’t answer her. “We’ve been trying to repair something we’ve never really had.” Harry gave her a look. She walked for a few more minutes before stopping. Harry noticed that she was chewing her bottom lip, something Harry had never seen her do. It reminded him a bit of Hermione. “Don’t you have anything to say?” She asked him.

“Not really.” He told her.

“You must have something you’d like to say without an audience.” She returned. Oh, if only she knew! “You do. I can see it in your face.” She gave him a smirk. Harry blanked his face before returning her stare.

“That doesn’t mean you’ll ever hear what I would like to say.” He told her, voice impassive and expressionless.

“I wish you would tell me.” She said, reaching out to take his hand. Harry pulled back a bit and she dropped her hand. “I wish you would scream at me, yell, or something. It would have to be better than this mask you have.” She allowed her frustration to leak through in her voice.

“Maybe I don’t want you to know how I feel.” He stopped and looked at a plant his science teacher had shown him just the week before. “Besides. –“ Harry cut himself off. He didn’t want her to know!

“ Besides what?” She had noticed that he was about to say something and pounced on it.

“Nothing.” Harry walked forward a little bit. His aunt’s next words stopped him dead in his tracks.

“ ‘Besides, you don’t care anyway?’” She asked. It wasn’t quite what Harry had wanted to say, but it was close. Scarily close. He was going to say ‘besides, you wouldn’t care anyway. You never did before.’ before he stopped himself.

“You never did before.” He growled at her. He decided that this little family jaunt was getting a little tense and he needed to go back to the school. Snape was there, after all. Harry needed to protect his floor mates from the snarky language. Petunia didn’t answer him. It was just as he thought. She didn’t really care about him. She was just doing this to make herself feel good. He snorted and started walking again.

“Where are you going?” She asked.

“Away from you.” He answered before striding towards the school building, trying to cut through the undergrowth. He could fix any tears in his clothing with wandless magic. The next thing that happened shocked him so badly he couldn’t speak for a few seconds. Petunia reached out and grabbed him around the waist, almost bodily picking him up. He knew he was scrawny, but he had gained a few inches and put on some weight since he had been at St. Jude’s. This was ridiculous! “Let go!” He commanded. His statement was ignored as Petunia dragged him back into the little clearing in the trees. She dropped to the ground, pulling him down with her. He immediately tried to get to his feet, but she held onto him. “Leave me alone!” Petunia pulled him closer and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Harry found that his aunt was stronger than she looked as he repeatedly tried to pull away from her. This was not fair! He just

wanted to go back to the building. "Let go of me!" He felt a familiar sensation creep into his stomach and throat. The last time he had felt this way was when he broke down about Sirius. "Just...just." His throat closed up and he gasped for air. His heart started racing and his chest hurt. Why did this hurt?

"It's okay, Harry." A voice said somewhere near him. That was not Paul. Harry only shook his head. "It's going to be okay." A strange feeling surrounded him. What was it?

"It's not going to be okay!" He pushed at the person holding him. She looked vaguely familiar. His aunt! It was his aunt! He tried to get up, but he felt drained and couldn't complete the attempt. "Why are you doing this?" He could hear the plea in his voice. He just wanted her to let go.

"Because I care about you." She told him. He laughed a bit, which sounded hysterical to his own ears. He wondered if it sounded the same to her.

"You've never cared about me!" He pushed at her, trying to get some space to move, but that only allowed her to pull him in closer. "You hated me! You didn't want me! You weren't proud of me. You kept me in a cupboard. You made me a slave. You treated me like a burden. I certainly didn't ask to be born! I didn't want my parents to die, I didn't want Voldemort to return and try to kill me, and I certainly didn't want this!" He gestured towards his scar. "I hate being famous. I hate being a wizard sometimes, because of the way they all look at me. I hate being Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Won't-Die, the Savior of the Wizarding World, Dumbledore's Little Pet. I hate living with you, because you don't understand me, and you have never tried to understand me. I hate myself for trying to get your approval all these years, just hoping that you would love, because you have never loved me!" Harry was losing his steam at this point and stopped fighting against the arms that held him in place. "My family doesn't love me. No body loves me." He whispered. He gave a final token push before collapsing against the body next to his. He knew, intellectually, that it was his aunt and not a good person to lean on, but he couldn't bring himself to care. She could move him if she wanted. She had proved

that just a few minutes ago. He brushed at his face, angrily pushing away the tears that had somehow emerged. Three breakdowns in one day. He figured that it must be some kind of St. Jude's record.

"It's going to be okay." She whispered to him. He shook his head. "It's all going to be okay. I won't let anyone hurt you. Not anymore."

"Even Uncle Vernon?" He asked in a timid voice. His aunt had never really hurt him aside from the hand slaps that even Dudley had received, but Vernon had a heavier hand than Petunia. Petunia stiffened next to him, causing him to tense, getting ready to run.

"Has Vernon hurt you?" She asked, reaching up to stroke his hair. Harry didn't bother to tell her that Rick would be upset if it was messed up.

"Once or twice. Not too hard." Oh, that felt nice. His eyes closed in pleasure. His aunt could keep that up for the rest of the day if she wanted. It was different from the way that Voldemort had stroked his hair before the lessons started.

"He will never hurt you again. Neither will Dudley." His aunt told him. Harry was doubtful.

"You're not mad?" He asked. He didn't realize that he could have easily gotten up if he wanted.

"No, Harry. I'm not mad. Why would I be?" She said as she reached down to pick up his hand.

"I said all those things..." He reminded her. She shrugged.

"I asked you to." She said with a smile.

"That was a dirty trick!" He whined a bit. Petunia only smirked at him.

"It worked, didn't it?" She asked. Harry had to concede that it had worked. That didn't mean he liked it. "Some of your statements I

agree with. We never did try to understand you. We did treat you horribly. You didn't ask to be born, and you didn't ask for everything that has happened to you to happen to you." She told him. Harry nodded. He knew that he was right. "But," Harry knew that she would have a 'but'. "I wish I could ask for your forgiveness. I can't bring myself to it. I don't deserve it." Darn right, she didn't deserve his forgiveness! "I'm not asking you to forget everything I have done to you. I couldn't." She squeezed his hand a little bit and continued stroking his hair. "I only ask that you give me a chance to try and fix a very large mistake I have made. You don't have to give me this chance. I only hope you will." She stopped there, as though gauging his reaction.

"What?" He asked when he realized she was waiting for him. She turned his head to face her.

I hope that you give me a chance to show you how much I love you." Harry looked into her eyes and saw a few scenes he knew he shouldn't be seeing. He had not even thought of a spell! He saw her smiling down at him when he was a baby, a memory of Vernon telling her what they would do, and her watching him sleep. He was young then, he wasn't sure how young, but older than a baby. Could she really be telling the truth? Could he trust her? He looked around, desperate for someone to rescue him. He couldn't do this. He couldn't open up and let her in, only to allow her to destroy him later. Could he? She was still waiting for an answer. He nodded, tears appearing in his eyes. What was with his emotions? He was all over the place today. Petunia pulled him towards her and Harry buried his face on her shoulder.

This felt...different. He wondered if this was how his mother would have held him, had she been alive. A warm feeling settled into his chest as he cried. She rubbed his back, something only Mrs. Weasley had done when he had woken from a nightmare once at the Burrow. Something inside him told him that this was what had been missing his whole life. His tears calmed as the warm feeling grew. Breakdown number four done now. Would he get a plaque for the most number of breakdowns? He hoped so. It had been hard work. He pulled away and she let him go this time. "Better?" She asked. Harry nodded a bit. "Good." She stood and brushed herself off before reaching down a

hand to help him up. Harry looked at it a second before reaching out and taking it. He pulled himself to his feet and looked anywhere but his aunt. He was only slightly embarrassed by what had happened. Okay, he was extremely embarrassed by it! "Let's get back to Paul. He must be frantic. He's lost two patients now." He snickered at the image of a frantic Paul. Paul went frantic if the cafeteria ran out of spaghetti.

The two started back towards the building. "Aunt Petunia?" She looked at him. "You won't tell Uncle Vernon about this, will you?" He knew he looked like he had gone through a mud puddle at this point, between crying more than once and the woods.

"I won't tell him, so long as you don't tell him how my bum got dirty." Harry stared at her.

"You said 'bum'." He said incredulously. She only shook her head.

"What did you think I called it when you were little?" She questioned. "When I was potty-training you?"

"What would I have to do to make sure you never mention such an embarrassing topic in public ever again?" He asked. "Especially around my friends?" He added. She gave him a grin that reminded him of Hermione when she was feeling particularly mischievous.

"I'm not sure." She told him. "Hmm." She appeared deep in thought. "How about we make a deal? If I do something that upsets you, no matter what it is, you'll tell me. In return, I won't mention anything from your baby days to anyone."

"Make that childhood and you've got a deal." He told her.

"I don't know." She hedged from agreeing. "There was that one time you turned your teacher's hair blue. I think that is a particularly amusing story. I'm sure Hermione would love it."

"Hermione's just a friend. Besides, my teacher looked better with blue hair, anyways." Harry thought about Petunia's bargaining

attempt. She had said anyone. He guessed that included the press. "All right. I agree. I'll let you know what I'm feeling, but you have to do the same if I do something that freaks you out."

"Does your use of slang count?" She asked. He shook his head.

"No way. You can't touch the slang." Petunia nodded.

"Deal." She gave him a smile. He opened the door for her and allowed her to go in first. Harry waved at the desk attendant, who looked shocked to see Harry so dirty. So the underbrush had layer of mud on it. Big deal. His aunt looked almost as bad. Voices coming down the hall made him freeze.

"Quick!" He told her as he pushed her towards the empty cafeteria. Petunia allowed him to lead her from the main hall and hide her before she asked him what was wrong. "I forgot to tell you that Snape arrived a few minutes after I climbed the tree." Her eyebrows rose, but she said nothing

"Deshi!" Harry whirled at Sensei's voice. The man came dashing out from the kitchen with a tub of Harry's favorite ice cream, mint chocolate chip, in his hands, and an irate kitchen worker on his heels. "It is for deshi!" The man explained, avoiding the snarling man. "Deshi! Catch!" Sensei lobbed the container at him and took off for the main hallway. The kitchen worker, whom Harry remembered as Richard, simply raised an eyebrow at Harry. Harry surrendered the ice cream.

"Barmy old codger." Richard mumbled under his breath. Harry snorted and moved to the window. Snape was now walking down the path away from the school building. Phew. That was close.

"Is he gone?" Petunia asked. Snape Disapparated at that moment.

"Yes. He just left." Harry relaxed his shoulders the slightest bit and turned to face his aunt.

“Good.” She said. “I would have a hard time visiting you at Hogwarts.” She told him with a smile. “Let’s go find Paul, shall we?”

“Too late.” Paul said from the doorway. “I found you.” Paul came into the room and dropped to one knee in front of Harry. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Harry, or make you feel like I didn’t like your...” Paul froze and looked around. It was only him, Joe, Petunia, and Harry. “magic. I’m quite intrigued by it. I just don’t know how to help you if something happens to you while you’re using it.” He explained. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.” Harry looked at Paul a second before answering.

“You’re just going to have to trust me.” He told Paul. “I’ll translate my book so you know what I’m reading, if you want. I won’t try anything like Diagon Alley again. Anything I will do is going to be small. I know you won’t believe me when I say this, but I hate the hospital wing.” Paul smiled a little bit.

“Alright. I’ll trust you on this. Just please don’t make me have a heart attack again like you did...” He stopped and looked Harry over. “What happened to you?”

“Err. Woods. Trees. Dirt. Nothing big.” He answered Paul. Paul looked between him and Petunia.

“Alright, Petunia. How did you find him?” he asked. She only shook her head.

“Our secret.” She told him. “Mine and Harry’s.” Paul shrugged and spread his hands helplessly.

“Who am I to stand in the way of your secrets?” Paul asked. “Harry, why don’t you clean up?” Harry nodded and started away. Petunia gave him a short hug when he passed. This affectionate version of Petunia was going to take some getting used to. He gave her an embarrassed smile and moved away. It was going to take a lot of getting used to. The warm feelings were back. He smiled to himself and dashed up to his room. He wondered if his aunt knew how to play chess. He opened his door and froze when he saw a roll of

parchment lying on his bed, tied with a green ribbon. He reached out a shaky hand and picked it up, pulling the ribbon to release the roll.

Potter,

I promised the headmaster that I would bring you back to Hogwarts if I saw you. Congratulations on not being seen. I can only guess that we have just missed each other. You can rest assured that your sanctuary among the Muggles has not been revealed, nor shall I reveal it unless there is a case of emergency. In fact, if it had not been for the lone spell book left on your desk, I never would have known this was your room. Luckily, the tour guide left me a moment in the hallway, which I prolonged with a handy little charm to enable me to write this note. Hogwarts is so peaceful without you there to cause trouble. The Weasley twins, however, have been replaced by a rather good group of students, whose identities are as of yet unknown. This group of students managed to have classes cancelled for an entire day due to the pranks they set. I'm sure you already know all about it. Please tell Miss Granger that the fireworks in the dungeon were perfect and I will not dock her grade since none of my ingredients were contaminated. I shall have to find another way. Do try to stay out of trouble. I have a lot of important experiments coming up and I don't want them interrupted.

SS

Harry couldn't resist not answering the letter. He grabbed a pen and wrote a short little message.

-Trouble usually finds me. I don't look for it.

He got the shock of his life when the letter answered back.

-I am well aware of that.

Harry's eyes grew wide at the answer.

-Professor Snape?

-No, Potter. It's Father Christmas.

-That's a disturbing image.

-Now I know what will give you nightmares.

-Actually, no. I know a better image. (Shudder)

-What?

-Voldemort in a tutu.

-You have a damaged mind, Potter.

-Must have been all the potions fumes.

-Har, har.

-I think I just died. Professor Snape just laughed.

-Oh. I have accomplished the Dark Lord's dream. I managed to kill the Boy-Who-Lived.

-Since when have we been able to have a civil conversation?

-You have very low standards of conversation.

-Well, what would you call this?

-Witty comments on my part, mindless dribble on yours.

-You already said I have a mind.

-My mistake.

-Hey!

-Ah, teenage indignation. I knew you had it in you somewhere.

-Why did you leave this parchment here, charmed like this?

-In case you needed a wizard. Now, as dazzling as this conversation is, I'm afraid I have other matters to attend to. Do NOT use this for anything but an emergency.

-Yes, sir. Thank you. You know what this means?

-You are capable of following simple instructions?

-Well, that and you were kind of worried about me.

-I did not say that.

-I know.

Harry rolled up the parchment and placed it in his desk drawer. In case of emergency. That was a great idea. Snape had a great idea. Harry glanced up, just to make sure that the sky wasn't falling. He was safe. The sky was still in place.

Author's Note: I may just have to hide now. (Checks for passport.)

Author's Note: Thanks to all who reviewed. I love them all. I can't answer them, because it would take too long. Here's the next chapter. Do try and not get used to this. Finals are coming up.

Harry pounded down the hallway, gasping for air in his desperate attempt to avoid the people chasing him. He was unsure of who exactly was chasing him. The only things he knew was that they were almost as fast as he was, they were wizards, and they were not out to kill him per se, but were wishing to stop him from getting away. The spells they were firing were not intended to hurt him. They only wished to stop him. Slowing charms, stopping charms, Petrificus Totalis, and Stupefy were the only spells used. Who were these people, why were they chasing him, and how was he going to get away?

He dashed around the corner and had to dodge away from a man standing in the middle of the hallway. The man reached out to grab him as Harry managed to somehow turn and flee in the opposite direction. The others were closer now. Harry crossed the hallway and fled down a side hallway that was lined with doors. Where was he? He chanced a look behind him to see where his pursuers were. He felt himself slam into a rather hard body. Arms wrapped around him and picked him up before the ringing in his ears could stop from the impact. His glasses slid off his face and fell to the ground to be smashed underfoot by the man who was currently carrying Harry off somewhere. Harry struggled against the man's arms, only to feel that the arms grew tighter the more he fought. Breathing became painful and spots started to appear in front of his eyes. The man made soothing noises as he opened doorways (Harry was not sure how he managed such things. Both of the man's arms were currently wrapped around Harry's rib cage.)

Wherever they were headed, they were going down. Harry relaxed his body the best he could in hopes of gaining more space to breathe. His prayers were answered as the arms loosened the slightest bit, though they still had a firm hold on him. Harry blinked through the fuzziness in front of his eyes. He couldn't really see what was happening around him. The people chasing him had somehow fallen in step behind the man holding him. He knew he was scrawny, but this being picked up and carted about places was starting to tick him

off in the extreme. He could walk, thank you very much. He squirmed a bit to look up at the man to tell him exactly that, but the grip only tightened again to keep Harry in position. Harry relaxed again in hopes of saving his respiration. The hold relaxed again and he could breathe normally. Harry tried to talk to the man, but he was only shushed, as a child would be every time he opened his mouth.

The man opened another door without hands and they entered a dimly lit place. Harry couldn't make out any shapes through the murkiness and hoped that nothing would happen where he would need to defend himself. He was basically defenseless. The way the man was holding him prevented Harry from gaining his feet for the purpose of walking, much less running. His right arm was clasped firmly to his chest, and his left was bent at his side. The added fact of his glasses not only missing, but also lying broken somewhere several levels up did nothing to help his confidence. He groaned when his body was shifted and his breathing further constricted for a second. Spots appeared in front of his eyes again as his body was righted and set on something soft. His brain supplied the word "bed," though it seemed different, somehow. He gasped in air, unrestricted for the first time for almost twenty minutes. One strong hand kept Harry in place while the other hand moved to relieve Harry of all his weapons. Harry tried to stand, but the man only pushed him backwards against the wall and pinned him there with a hand around his throat. His airway was not constricted, but the position of the hand was enough to deter Harry from any movement to free himself from the man he could barely make out in front of him. His shoes and socks were slipped off his feet as another figure moved in towards Harry. Heavy objects were fitted around Harry's wrists as the first man stepped back. Horror coursed through Harry as he realized that they were chains of some sort. He jerked at them, only to have the movement stopped by the first man's hand back around his throat. It was a firm pressure, this time, and it was tight enough to make Harry freeze. Something was fitted over Harry's face and buckled behind his head. His wrists were chained to either side of him. He thanked whatever small mercies still existed that he was in a sitting position and the chains had a small bit of play to them. He could stand, if need be.

The two figures backed away to leave Harry alone in the darkness. Harry counted to two-hundred before moving. His thoughts raced. He was chained up, something was over his face, and he was without weapons. And shoes. Great. He moved one hand up to his face and discovered that the thing over it was nothing more than a mask. He tried to move it off, but discovered that it had somehow been locked around his head. He decided to worry about removal later. His hand traveled over it and he realized that it had his scar right where his scar was supposed to be, carved into the material. "What?" He mumbled. Speaking was difficult with the cumbersome object on his face. Light flooded the room at the word. Harry blinked against the sudden blinding light and fought his way to his feet, ready to meet whatever it was on his feet. His eyes cleared and he saw a mirror standing in front of him, only he didn't recognize the face. The scar was there, but the face was not the same he had seen when he had brushed his teeth just a little while ago, before he had gone to bed. It was him and not him at the same time.

Something swept his feet out from under him as a hand pushed him backwards on the bed. Harry blinked through the mask and found his broken glasses fitted over the mask. "We must take care of the Boy Who Lived." Dumbledore's kindly face stared down at him, the ever-present twinkle in his eyes. The voice, however, belonged to Voldemort and so did the body. Only the face belonged to Dumbledore. Harry jerked away from him and pulled hard at his chains. He needed to get away! "Harry?" Voldemort's voice came out of a concerned Dumbledore's face. "What's wrong, my dear boy?" A hand reached out and settled on Harry's hands, trying to keep Harry from jerking. Dumbledore's expression grew frightened. "Harry. Stop this. Just let me take care of you. You're going to hurt yourself." Dumbledore's face, Voldemort's voice. Voldemort's wand appeared in his hand. "I'll make it all better." Harry froze as the wand raised. "Avada-" Harry screamed.

"Evan!" Warm hands wrapped around his already chained wrists and held them down to the surface of the bed beneath him. "I'm not going to hurt you, kid." Who was Evan? "Bug, go get Paul." Harry pulled away from the chains again. He fought them, knowing if he didn't get away, he was going to die. "Evan! Wake up! I'm not going to hurt you." Harry couldn't breathe again. The hand was back on his

throat, tightening each second it remained. "Grab the blanket, Mike. It's wrapped around his neck." The hand moved as another voice joined in the clamor surrounding him in the dungeon room.

"Buddy! Wake up!" Strong but gentle arms lifted him from the bed and cuddled him as the chains were released from his hands. "Evan? Can you open your eyes for me?" Harry drew in a shuddering breath and started to cough as he came back to full wakefulness. He collapsed against Paul as he realized that everything had only been a dream. "Evan?" Paul asked in concern. Harry tried to open his eyes, but could not find the strength to do so. "Evan?" A panicked voice called to him. "Harry!" Harry did not hear his real name. He had slipped into unconsciousness.

Snape rolled out of bed when he heard a bell tolling somewhere in his bedroom. What was that? He stood and allowed his eyes to travel around his room in a search for the disturbance. His eyes came to rest on the charmed parchment he had connected to the note he had left behind at Potter's sanctuary. Oh, no. The boy couldn't even go twelve hours without disturbing Snape. It seemed that Fate had other plans for Snape instead of sleep. Oh, only to have Potter missing again! He dressed in his usual robes and ducked into his hallway. He stopped at Draco's door and went into the room to check on the boy. Draco's eyes opened once he felt Snape's stare. "Sev? What is it?" He asked groggily.

"I'm going out. Attend classes and training as normal. A house elf will wake you if I am not back in the morning." He told the boy as he ran a hand through the child's hair. Draco sat up, fully alert at the urgent tone in his mentor's voice.

"Is it the Mark?" He demanded. "You promised."

"No, it's not the Mark. Just something that requires my attention. Sleep well, Draco." Snape ran a final fond hand through Draco's hair before leaving the room and dashing down Slytherin's Escape (another secret passage known to only those worthy enough to be chosen as Head of Slytherin House). He found himself on the far side

of Hogsmeade and Apparated to the place he had only visited earlier that day.

The entire place seemed asleep when he let himself in through the front door. The attendant looked up at him, and then away once he flicked his wand in her direction. He swallowed an invisibility potion and made his way towards the boy's room. Potter had better have a Death Eater's wand pointed at his head to have disturbed Severus's rest. He gained the third floor hallway and stepped into the boy's room. Where was the boy? Had the Death Eaters already made off with him? Snape decided to find some answers. Even Muggles who had their memories erased still retained part of what had happened in their subconscious and Snape knew he could break into a subconscious if need be. He swallowed the antidote to the potion and went down the hallway towards the nurses' station.

"Visiting hours are over, sir." Jack told the strange man that approached the desk. "I can show you the way out."

"I'm here for an emergency. Where is the boy in room eight?" Jack stopped and thought of which boy was roomed there. His brain clicked and realized it was Evan, the only boy he had ever known to have people actively hunting him. Paul had called a meeting with the entire staff, alerting them to the fact that Evan James' life was in danger and they should look out for strange people lurking about. Jack knew that the definition of "strange" varied person to person, but this man certainly fit all criteria because of his rather peculiar mode of dress.

"May I see some identification of relationship to the patient and an authorization from his primary caregiver, as well as a release from his doctor stating that you are, in fact, allowed to visit and are deemed a necessary person in case of an emergency?" Jack rattled off. He didn't really need all of that, but in Evan's case, he was willing to ask for a little insurance to keep 007 safe. "If you cannot provide the required documentation, I'm afraid that I'll have to have security escort you from the grounds." Snape growled and flicked his wand at the nurse. Muggles were so annoying sometimes. He snapped his cloak and swept down the hallway. He wanted nothing more than to

return to Hogwarts and his exceedingly comfortable bed, but that bothersome thing known as his conscience would not let him leave until he either saw Potter, or had found what had happened to the boy.

“You didn’t leave a note in Harry’s room?” A voice asked near Severus. Interesting. Harry and note in the same sentence. This could prove fruitful. “I see. No. I’m serious. There was a note in Harry’s room that said, ‘Emergency Only’. I wrote ‘help’ on it. I was hoping that it would bring you. Yes, I see. No, we’re not sure what happened. Uh-huh. I look forward to seeing you here soon.” Snape crept up behind the man and waited for the man to hang up the telephone. The man did as he hoped and turned around.

“Where is Potter?” He questioned the man. The man only took a step back in surprise.

“I’m not sure I know who you’re talking about.” The man answered in a calm and even voice. What was with the Muggles here? Did they not find him intimidating enough.

“My name is Severus Snape, and I left that note you just mentioned to someone over the telephone.” Paul looked him over.

“You are here to help Harry?” Paul asked. So, this was a full-blooded wizard? Sure, he had seen Remus and a few Death Eaters, but Remus looked so different from this one. This wizard looked powerful.

“Yes, I am here to help, Harry.” Snape told the man. “I cannot do that unless I am able to see the boy. I trust he is in the hospital wing?” Snape asked. His suspicions were confirmed just a few seconds later by the man’s reaction.

“Well, yes. How did you know?” Paul questioned. Snape only motioned for the man to lead the way. “I am Harry’s doctor. My name is Paul Lauter. You are his Potions professor?” Paul thought he recognized the name.

“Yes. He has spoken of me?” Snape asked. He wondered what Potter had said to this man about the magical world. It was most likely some blather about Gryffindor house and Quidditch.

“Briefly. I’m not allowed to say what he said, but he has mentioned you.” Probably nothing but abuse. Paul opened the door to the hospital wing and motioned towards the only occupied bed. “I’m not sure what happened. Jack, his night nurse this quarter, said that Harry had a violent nightmare and woke screaming. He fought to get away from Jack. He displayed all the symptoms of a panic attack. He didn’t really wake up. There was a brief moment of transition between nightmare and this state. I’m not sure what is wrong with him.” Paul explained to Snape. “I figured it was something to do with his magic and I found the note you left behind. I guessed that this, if anything, was an emergency.” Paul reasoned with himself more than Snape.

“This? An emergency for Potter?” Snape said dryly. “Not likely. I was amazed to see no corpses lying about when I arrived.” Snape pulled out his wand and tapped Harry’s forehead.

“Are there usually corpses?” Paul asked. What had Harry gone through and not told him about? More importantly, how was this affecting Harry?

“Ever since his first year.” Snape paused to consider something he could see, but Paul could not. Paul figured it was magic. “No, wait. I was wrong. We never did find a piece of Quirrell. He disintegrated. His second year, it was a basilisk corpse, and if I can’t figure out how to get into the Chamber of Secrets to retrieve some parts, I may have to bribe the boy to let me in.” Paul made a mental note to approach Harry about that at a later date. “Hmm. What was his reaction, exactly?” Snape asked. Paul consulted the incident report Jack had just given him not more than ten minutes prior.

“He screamed, which alerted the night nurse. The nurse tried to wake him, but nothing helped. Any kind of touch only produced extreme panic. Symptoms include panic attack, shaking, gasping for air. Nothing else. The brief moment of transition before appearing like

this. Exactly as I told you earlier.” Paul reached out and stroked Harry’s hair.

“Potter is fine, or will be, at any rate.” Snape dug out a vial. “A glass of water, please.” Paul filled a glass from the nearby pitcher and handed it to Snape. The Potions Master dumped an entire vial into the glass and heated it with his wand. “His scar did not bleed?” Snape asked.

“No. He didn’t touch his scar. He seemed most concerned about having his wrists free.” Paul told Snape. Snape raised an eyebrow before turning back towards Harry.

“Do you have a cloth?” Paul handed him one of the many washcloths stored in the nearby linen closet. Snape heated the water again to boiling (Paul wondered how he managed to do that in a glass). Snape placed the rag into the boiling water and allowed it to soak for a brief moment. He removed it from the glass, wrung it out, and took a deep breath near the cloth, and moved it away from his face with a slight cough. He unbuttoned the first few buttons of Harry’s pajamas and laid the cloth on the boy’s chest.

“What is that?” Paul asked, curious despite the stern demeanor.

“Special smelling salts I had to devise for Potter when he started receiving visions from the Dark Lord. The heat helps to distribute the fumes and will bring him back to consciousness slowly, as opposed to all at once, as the Muggle version tends to do to him. His body does not handle shocks well directly after a vision.” Snape stopped and considered the boy on the bed. “The headmaster does like to coddle him a bit. Of course, I can see the reasoning behind a gradual awakening. His subconscious will have time to process any memories of the Dark Lord and his actions this way, and starts the healing process.” Snape stopped speaking at this point and only sat in the chair next to the bed. Paul reached out and started to run a hand through Harry’s hair. Snape had spoken the truth. No one, not even Poppy, knew about this special smelling salt he created. He was often called to the hospital wing to administer it after Poppy had put

the boy to sleep with the Cruciatus Curse still affecting his nervous system. This relaxed his muscles, giving them enough strength to rejuvenate themselves without risk of injury.

Potter rarely awoke during these treatments, and if he did, never seemed to remember them the next day. The boy didn't know about it, but if it was some release from the burdens the boy carried, and it could be given anonymously, well, all to the better. Attachments were not the best things in the world to have when you numbered anywhere on Voldemort's wish list. A happily drugged and groggy Potter made a rather entertaining sight at any rate. Snape preferred things kept the way they were.

"Pfessr?" A groggy voice slurred from the bed. Ah, right on time.

"Did you have a vision, Potter?" He asked as he reached out a hand and massaged the boy's upper chest and shoulders, skimming over his neck lightly. The familiar movements must have calmed the boy from his momentary panic (only Snape knew the look he had had in his eyes) and allowed Harry to understand his professor in his slightly drugged state. Harry relaxed as a familiar hand traveled over his chest. The tightness eased a bit and he sighed in contentment. That felt good.

"No." He answered. His eyes drifted shut as Snape repeated the patterns. "M fine." He mumbled as Snape washed his face with the rag. Harry twitched a hand to push the man away. His hand never left the bed. He hated having his face touched.

"Sure you are, Potter. Does anything hurt?" Snape questioned. He motioned for Paul to be quiet when the therapist would have asked a question. It was better for Snape to handle this. Potter knew the questions already and would respond so long as no one else interrupted their conversation. The moment some one else made their presence known, Potter's mask slid into place. Snape dipped the rag into the still hot water and replaced it on Harry's chest. He knew Potter never liked to feel heat again after his skin had been exposed to the cool air, but it helped him to breathe.

“My wrists.” He said after taking a deep breath and coughing a bit from the fumes of the salts. “He hurt them.” Snape’s hand froze in mid-air towards the cloth, ready to start the massage again.

“Who hurt them?” Snape asked urgently. This could have been a visitor from Voldemort, rather than a vision. The follower could still be in the building.

“Dumbledore.” Harry answered. Dumbledore? Snape felt his shoulders relax as he realized that the boy’s current state was due from a particularly bad nightmare, obviously about the Hogwarts headmaster, that had induced a panic attack, causing his unconsciousness. He had warned Dumbledore that the boy needed treatment for those attacks! Snape reached out and started the massage again, watching as Potter relaxed to the touch.

“You’ve had a nightmare, Potter. Nothing more. You’ll be fine in the morning.” Snape told the boy. Only a hand twitched in response. “Will you drink something for me?” Harry nodded a bit without opening his eyes. Snape pulled out a vial and uncorked it. He reached behind Harry’s head and tilted it up a bit. “Sip.” He told Harry. The boy complied, but didn’t swallow. Snape knew Potter’s taste buds were rebelling at that moment. He massaged the boy’s throat until he swallowed the potion. “You’re going back to sleep now.” Harry mumbled something in response and fell asleep before he finished his sentence.

Snape pocketed his vials and soaked the rag again. “He’ll be fine in the morning. He might sleep most of the day away, but he’ll fall asleep normally tomorrow night. I’ve given him some Dreamless Sleep potion. He won’t dream again tonight, though he is still able to have visions. He won’t remember the conversation we just had.” He wrung out the rag and replaced it on Harry’s chest. “You may remove the rag after it has cooled. That’s all he will need tonight.” Snape dug out a vial and handed it to Paul. “Just in case you need something like this again. Put the powder into a container of cold water. The amount a normal sized glass holds is fine. Heat the water to boiling twice. If the fumes make you cough, then it is ready. Soak a cloth in the mixture and lay it with the top lined up with his collarbones. That

is enough to help.” Paul nodded and placed the vial in his pocket protectively. “He won’t really remember anything when he wakes, but his waking up is not a problem. If he does have memories, they’ll be jumbled. He’ll sort them out in time. He always does. Just do not allow him to move too much at once first thing. He will retain a bit of sluggishness the first five minutes or so. His coordination might be a bit off tomorrow. It will pass.” Snape finished his instructions and turned to leave. “Do try to refrain from using the parchment unless there is a Death Eater holding you all hostage. The slightest mark will alert me.” He gathered his robes about him and went for the door. Another person on the other side of the door made him stop. “Wolf!”

“No time, Severus. Where is he?”

“Blissfully unconscious.” Snape snapped at Remus as the man pushed past him to enter the infirmary.

“Hello, Paul. I came over as soon as I could.” Remus said as he came to a stop next to Harry’s bed.

“Wolf, do you mean to tell me that you have known where the Potter brat was this entire time?” Snape eyed the man who had played the entire Order like a violin. Would wonders never cease?

“Most of the time, yes.” Remus passed a hand through Harry’s hair. Remus prepared himself for an argument with the other Order member. He was surprised when he heard something suspiciously close to laughter from the other’s side of the room. “What?” Remus demanded.

“I don’t think Dumbledore knows how good you are.” Snape told him. “I won’t tell him about this. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when he realizes he has been duped.”

Remus stared at Severus for a full thirty seconds before speaking. “You’re not here to take him back?” Remus asked. Snape raised an eyebrow and his air took on a ‘how dare you question me’ flavor. Snape strode back over to the bed and looked down at the boy.

“I am my own man, Wolf, no matter how many masters I serve.” Snape told him. “The boy is getting necessary treatment and has not died yet. In fact, I think he has put on a whole stone and gained a bit in height.” Snape mused a bit. “Who am I to wreck the chance that he might become stronger here?” Snape told him.

“Stone and three pounds.” Paul said. “He’s gained a full three inches in height.” Snape looked at Lupin as though saying that Paul had made his point.

“Well, Severus. Glad to have you as part of the PPs.” Remus told him. Snape folded his arms and his eyebrow went up again.

“PPs. Dear heaven, I am afraid to ask.” He said in a sardonic voice.

“Potter Protectors.” Remus supplied for the sarcastic professor.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Of course. I should have known.” Snape told him, shaking his head in bemusement. He rearranged his robe and sighed. This boy gains followers as the Pied Piper.

“Yes, who would have thought?” Remus dug into his accompanying briefcase, one that identified him as Harry’s mentor and advisor, and pulled out a small book. “Everyone has one of these.” Remus told Snape. He tapped it once with his wand and it glowed a bit before appearing normal. “Only members can read it.” Snape took the book and looked it over. “It’s a Mini-Messenger. Only members have them. They’re not due out for the public until Christmas.”

“You are his mentor and advisor?” Snape asked. Remus paused for the briefest second before nodding. “I wondered who it was.” Snape said. “Congratulations on undermining the laws on werewolves.” Snape said with a smirk. He pocketed the Messenger without looking at the inscription.

“The password is light saber.” Remus told him. Snape quirked an eyebrow, but nodded his acceptance. “I’ll see you later.” Snape nodded to Paul and swept from the room.

“PPs?” Paul asked. Remus sat down in the chair next to Harry’s bed and held the boy’s hand.

“Potter’s Protectors. We are a group of wizards and witches, though Severus and I are currently the only adult members that I know of. The rest are a group of Hogwarts students who not only know where Harry is, but work to keep his location a secret from Dumbledore.” Remus smiled as he remembered the last note from Hermione. Their pranks had worked out well and they had all enjoyed a day free from classes. Hermione would have preferred to have classes, but she was willing to sacrifice one day in favor of helping Harry.

“Ah, yes. You told me about that searching through the schools plan last night.” Remus nodded. He had arrived after Snape, but since nothing had happened, he figured that they were safe. He had guessed correctly. They were safe.

Hermione crept out of bed and went down the stairs. It was six o’clock in the morning, but the entire group of PPs was meeting in the Great Hall and she had to be there. True, it was not an ideal meeting place, but once they had managed to spread out notes and the like, no one would think anything of it. The Protectors did not have a morning session and this was the only time everyone could meet up. Fred and George were planning to sneak into Hogwarts (Hermione did not bother asking how they would accomplish this, nor did she want to know). The new members were coming to their first meeting as well. She felt a little nervous about it, but decided that nothing really bad could happen. There was no evidence, really, of anything they had managed. She checked her Mini-Messenger and saw two new messages from Harry. The first made her pale and then curse herself for not checking earlier, or checking before she went to bed, as she usually did during the week. Why did she have to slack off on the one day Harry needed her most. The second message surprised her. It consisted of only two words: Never mind. She jotted out a quick message to see what had been the trouble and stashed it away.

She now had two Mini- Messengers. One she kept for talks with Harry, and the other was for the group. Mr. Arcane had become the group’s unofficial sponsor and had sent Hermione an adequate

number for the entire crowd and a few extras for new members. She had sent two to Remus Lupin, just in case he knew someone who was on Harry's side. She smiled as Neville, Colin, and Dennis made their appearance. She heard another pair of footsteps come down from the girls' tower. Ginny Weasley was not at her best first thing in the morning. She motioned for everyone to leave the tower. No one noticed a silent figure making its way after them.

Harry jerked as he woke up. Something was not right. He could feel it. He pushed himself to his feet and noticed that something was on his face. Oh, it was the mask. Why hadn't he been able to remove it earlier? He reached up and tried to undo the clasp, only to be disappointed. That was okay. It wasn't a disaster. Paul could remove it for him later. Now, he had to find a way out of this room. It had nothing in it. It was completely white, which was familiar, but it was not. It was not his room, though how he could tell the difference between one room like this and the next was beyond his reasoning powers. He felt disconnected from his own body. He felt like he had had a vision, but he knew that he hadn't. A voice made him jump. Who are you?

Harry whirled around, wand in hand, as he looked for the voice. Someone could obviously see him, but he could not see the person addressing him. "Harry Potter." He said, wand still raised in case of emergency. The voice chuckled. Harry failed to see what was so amusing. Harry felt the mask tighten the slightest bit, forming closer to his features.

What are you doing here? The voice asked once it got over its amusement. Harry turned and tried to find this oh so annoying omniscient voice. Harry decided that now was the time to leave and tried to locate the door. Disembodied voices were never good things in his experience. His dreams and visions had told him that. Where are you going? The voice asked as Harry tried to walk forward. He tried, but found that he was confined to a three foot square. Harry ignored the voice as he tried to stay calm and figure a way out of this mess. Mirrors appeared in front of Harry. He backed away from one to find that he backed into another. The image in every mirror was different. Who are you?

“I don’t know.” Harry whispered as he turned from one mirror to another. There were different images in each. He looked like a first year again, being congratulated by Dumbledore. His second year, covered in grime and glory. Surrounded by suspicion. Third year, the protected boy with a murderer after him. Fourth year, the Triwizard Champion. Fifth year, vision laden and distressed. His face as his godfather died. The mask he had slid on once he realized that if he didn’t put up a brave front, the others would only continue to treat him as a heartbroken child at Hogwarts. His breakdown at home. His thoughts stopped there. He thought of Privet Drive as home. Odd. He stopped and noticed that the mask continued to tighten around his face.

So many masks. So many spells. So many limitations. The voice said in the air. Harry pulled at the mask. He didn’t want to wear this stupid thing! He didn’t have to wear it! He pulled his wand out again and tapped it against the mask. Nothing. He tapped it one more time, only to have his wand break. He stared at it in horror. His wand was broken. It dropped from his nerveless fingers and the pieces rolled away from him and under the mirrors. Held by your own limitations. The voice said. Harry ignored it and tried to push the mirrors out of his way. The mask was becoming tighter. The mirrors disappeared all at once. Harry felt elated for the briefest of seconds before seeing what was waiting for him on the other side. The Order of the Phoenix and Voldemort and all of his followers stood, filling the entire room.. The strange thing was, they were not divided. They all stood next to each other, each seeming completely oblivious to the fact that their enemy was right next to them. They were all focused on Harry.

“Ah, the Boy Who Lived.” Dumbledore said. Harry stared at the man. Dumbledore had always been the one to call him ‘Harry’, or Mr. Potter, if there were other people around. “Come here, lad. It’s time we got you home.” Harry backed away a step or two and glanced at Voldemort.

“Come along, Harry Potter.” Voldemort’s voice was not pleasant, but it was not menacing either. Harry turned and tried to run in the opposite direction. He didn’t get far. A few masked Death Eaters and

friendly faces from the Order stood in his way and held him, gently, in place as Dumbledore and Voldemort came up to grab him. You allow them to do this. You limit yourself. The voice told Harry.

“I do not!” Dumbledore and Voldemort took no notice of Harry’s statement. In fact, they spoke to him as though they had not heard him scream at something.

Yes, you do. You are allowing them to cart you away now, just as you always do. The voice said. You limit yourself. You tighten that mask they gave you the first instant you met a magical person and knew him for what he was. You cherish that mask and guard it as a dragon guards his gold. Harry shook his head to deny it, feeling the mask grow tighter across his face. You love it, all of the attention and fame, the persona of a wounded hero. You can’t bear to give up that mask. It’s all you have left and you don’t want to give it up. Harry struggled against Voldemort and Dumbledore’s hands as he denied the claims the voice made. Chains appeared on his wrists once more as Dumbledore situated him in an armchair, patting his hair all the while. You love being the Boy Who Lived, Savior of the Wizarding World, Gryffindor Golden Boy, Triwizard Champion, Dumbledore’s little pet. The voice had spat out the last name, one which Harry had never really heard more than once. You lap it up, all of the attention, the showering of praise. You carry yourself as a wounded martyr and treasure it as your personality. The mask had tightened to the point of constricting Harry’s airway.

“I didn’t ask for this!” He wailed as Voldemort started lecturing him on wordless spells. “I never wanted this!” He answered the voice.

You allow it! The voice asserted through the din surrounding Harry. Harry felt something build up behind his eyes and rush through his body. A flash of bright light left his body and filled the entire room before coming back to him, leaving him slightly winded. Dumbledore and the Order were gone. Voldemort and his followers had disappeared. The mask fell from Harry’s face as the chair and chains vanished. Harry lay on the floor, simply breathing as he tried to figure out what he had managed to do. A slight fog drifted about him along the floor. He wasn’t sure why it was there, but it did exist. Once he

had figured out the fog, he realized that he was in a forest of some kind. It was not the Forbidden Forest. It felt different. Ancient almost. Well, nothing was eating him at the moment, so he figured that he was safe enough. He was extremely tired and he wanted nothing more than to fall asleep on the amazingly comfortable ground beneath him.

A figure appeared from behind one of the trees. Harry raised his eyes to look at this man, but decided that he wouldn't move until curses of some kind were used. The man knelt down next to Harry and moved his hair to reveal the scar. Harry stared at him. The man had hair that looked like Remus' own hair. "Salt and pepper" Remus had called it once. Dark brown eyes looked Harry over as he laid down the staff he was carrying. The man was magical. Harry could feel it somehow, though he wasn't sure how it was possible. The man rolled up his robe's sleeves before leaning down and picking Harry up. Not again! The man seemed to sense Harry's distress, for he merely chuckled in a deep voice. "Do not fear, child. You have reverted back to your age at which you first discovered magic. You have a lot to unlearn." Harry froze at the voice. It was the voice. The man gave Harry a kind smile, as though he knew Harry had figured it out. Sleep, child. You need your strength. The voice said inside his head.

Harry never heard the frantic voices calling his name as the doctor worked to stabilize his body to keep him from slipping away. Remus dashed off a quick message to Severus on the parchment he had left behind.

SS,

We're losing him. Return immediately.

RL

Author's Note: Do not get used to these intense number of updates. Finals will make me disappear.

Author's Note: To all who complained about the length of the last chapter: It was 13 pages long. I do not intend to make the chapters longer than that. In fact, I think I have been wonderful about updating (four chapters in a week comes to mind) and will ignore any comments about the length of any future chapters. (grumble grumble) For those who asked about school: It's going well, though I barely passed my Linguistics test. If a lawyer is reading this, could you tell me if I'm going to use linguistics in my future career? Please!

On to the story:

Harry came awake in stages. First was his sense of hearing as a fire crackled near him. He heard birdsong somewhere nearby and he heard his own breathing. The second sense was the sense of touch. He realized that he was very comfortable. He felt like he was lying on a pillow and made a mental note to tell Paul about it. Warm, thick, heavy blankets covered him and his head rested on a fluffy white pillow. He felt like the bed was huge compared to his own body. His nose twitched as he smelled something cooking. What was that? His teenager mind kicked him in the stomach, demanding food at all costs to his other comforts, as well as his daily morning trip to the bathroom. Harry forced his body into a sitting position as he kicked the blankets away. He sat up and started to stand, but he never made it to his feet. He hadn't noticed that his feet couldn't touch the floor from the bed. He fell in a heap at the side of the bed. The cold stone floor was a rude awakening to his sleep muzzled body.

"Oh, you're awake then?" A voice said as Harry heard a chair move and footsteps come near him. "Do you make it habit to fall out of bed?" Strong arms lifted Harry bodily from the floor and placed him back on the bed. Harry made a vow then and there that he would gain some more height and at least another stone. He was tired of being carted about as though his height made no difference! He was not a first year! Harry opened his eyes when he felt someone staring at him. He jerked in surprise as he did not see anyone familiar to him. "Good morning, Master Potter." The man said as he slid Harry's glasses into his hands. Strange. Harry could have sworn that they were broken sometime in the recent past.

“Who are you?” Harry asked. The man gave Harry an amused smirk.

“You truly do not remember that last dream you had?” He asked Harry as he moved towards the fireplace and started dishing something out from...was that a cauldron? Harry cast his thoughts back to his dream. Mask. Dumbledore. Voldemort. Chains. Something behind his eyes. Freedom. Forest. HIM. Harry’s face must have shown his returned memories, for the man gave a secretive smile as he returned to Harry with a wooden bowl and a cup of something.

“You haven’t answered my questions.” Harry told the man when he had offered Harry the bowl and cup he carried. Harry did not take the offered food. The man placed the bowl and cup down on a small table somehow wedged between the bed and nearby wall, sat down in a chair that ran up to meet him, and considered Harry with hooded eyes.

“Who do you think I am?” He asked Harry as he propped his legs up on the bed. Harry scooted aside to make room for his legs.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked. I don’t typically ask useless questions.” Harry told him, trying to figure a way out of this crazy...cottage. The man seemed greatly amused by Harry’s comment. He nodded and looked around.

“It seems like I have made the correct choice.” He stood and the chair moved back into position. “Eat and then we’ll get you some different clothes. I daresay that those you arrived in are too big for you now.” Harry blinked as he considered what the man had said. Too big for him? He had been in his St. Jude’s pajamas that actually fit him quite well. He stopped and looked down at his hands, only to freeze in shock. What...was...this? “Don’t panic. I told you.”

“What?” Harry squeaked. “Told me what?” He stared at his ridiculously small hands in horror. This man would be feeling some serious pain if Harry had to grow up again. He had just gotten used to his body! He wanted to be sixteen again. He was surprised to feel tears creep into his eyes. Oh, no! He could allow it with Paul, and

even Aunt Petunia, but not this man! He started to fight them back, only to be surprised when the man appeared in front of his bed and gave him a light smack to the cheek. It didn't hurt, but it was enough to shock him.

"You will not suppress any emotions while you are here. You have been sabotaging yourself all these years, Master Potter. I won't have it." Harry stared after him while the man moved away. "I de-aged you, if you will accept that term?" He paused, as though searching for Harry's approval. Harry nodded and he continued. "I de-aged you so that you would not have all those blocks and barriers you had from learning magic only with a wand." The man paused, as though waiting for something. "You will stay here until you have learned all that I have to teach you."

Harry digested this information. Alright, he had another psycho man wanting to be his teacher and he was being held hostage by said man. Why couldn't his life be normal? "Who are you?" He asked as he took a deep breath to calm himself.

"You still haven't figured it out?" The man asked in astonishment as he got his own bowl of food from the cauldron. "I would have thought that you had pieced the clues together by now."

Harry stared at the man as the stranger sat down and started his own meal without further comment to Harry. What clues? What was Harry supposed to know already? Something he had heard earlier clicked in his mind. He froze and looked up at the man. "Master Bleys?"

Severus Snape pondered his bad luck as he opened the doors to the already too familiar Muggle hospital wing he had seen one too many times tonight. "What is wrong with Potter?" He demanded as he walked in. The Muggle doctor only stared at him for a brief second before turning back to his patient, his eyes on a heart monitor as though it would tell him the answer to life's most important question.

"You that specialist?" Dr. Lansky asked of Snape as he noted down Harry's heartbeat on a chart. Snape glanced at Paul with an

unreadable expression before tapping the bag he carried with his wand.

“I am. What happened?” He asked as he removed his outer robe and handed it to Paul as he stepped up to the bed. If Potter was playacting, so help him...

“He stopped breathing.” Snape blinked. Never mind. No playacting here. Potter wouldn’t pull something like this. “I’m not sure how or why. He just stopped. Once we realized this, actually, it was Mr. Lupin over there,” the doctor tossed a vague hand out from his clipboard, gesturing towards where Remus was standing, “who noticed Harry here stopped breathing.” Snape nodded. “They called me and I found Paul doing CPR.” Snape cringed. He wondered if Potter would ever know. “We worked on him almost a full two minutes before he started breathing on his own. He’ll be lucky if he doesn’t have brain damage when he wakes up. Once he started breathing again, we hooked up the oxygen and the heart monitor, just in case. His vital signs are strong but he hasn’t woken up yet. Or moved. Or anything normal at all.” Snape nodded. That sounded pretty normal where Potter was concerned.

“You’ve done well, Dr. Lansky. Go take a breather. I think we would all benefit from some coffee, if you’d be willing. I’m going to start my examination.” A slight flick of the wand convinced the doctor that coffee would be the best thing for all considered, though he had no idea why the other doctor wanted rid of him. He wandered away as the other doctor relieved him of the patient’s medical record. “Such an intelligent man, too.” Snape said in a disappointed voice. “Oh well.” He read through the reports in Potter’s file, listening to the heart monitor the entire time. What had he missed? He shook his head and waved his wand at Harry. He frowned when he saw the results of the diagnostics spells. “Lupin, go contact his relatives.” He told the werewolf. Remus paled, but moved off to do as he was told. Snape turned to Paul.

“Has Potter sustained any injuries lately? Especially to his head?” Paul appeared to think for a moment.

“Not that I know of.” Paul said as he rubbed his eyes. “Sensei would know.” Snape motioned for Paul to get a hold of the man as he turned back to Harry. He pulled out another vial of the smelling salts and started preparations. “We’ve already tried that.” Paul told him from the corner of the room where the telephone rested.

“It won’t hurt to try it again. I have found that sometimes he needs more than one treatment to respond.” Snape told him.

“Sensei will be here as soon as he can, but he said that he didn’t know of any injuries that Harry may have had.” Snape snorted.

“That doesn’t say much about Potter.” Snape told the therapist. “He can keep many things to himself when he feels like it.” Snape pointed his wand at Harry. “Enerverate.” Potter didn’t respond. Lupin returned at that moment, looking as though he had run a marathon. Petunia and Vernon Dursley trailed behind him, Petunia looking frightened and Vernon looking dazed. “Tell me you didn’t take them both at once?” He demanded of Lupin. Remus sank into a chair and shook his head.

“One right after the other. Mrs. Dursley insisted.” Remus said as he closed his eyes. Snape took pity on the wolf and cast a small sleeping charm on him. Remus was not awake long.

“What’s wrong with Harry?” Petunia demanded as she came up next to bed. “He was fine earlier.” She explained.

“We’re not sure what is wrong with him, exactly.” Paul told her. Snape frowned at something another spell told him. If this was what he thought it was, Potter would not be able to stay in the Muggle world. He would need treatment at Mungo’s for this, if not a specialist. What had the boy gotten into this time? He turned to ask Remus for something when he realized that he had put the werewolf to sleep.

“Of all the times...” He muttered after looking at the gently snoring Remus. “Just when I need another wizard.”

Draco shuddered into view beside him. "What do you need, Severus?" Vernon Dursley jumped and told his wife that he was just going to sit down on the other side of the room. Snape looked down at Draco with an unreadable expression. How had he followed him? He had used the passage...oh, Draco was not going to be happy when Snape told him.

"All of his magical belongings from his room." He told his charge. "Will you assist?" He asked of Paul. Paul only nodded and started for the hallway. "We will be speaking of this when you return, Mister Malfoy." He told the boy. Draco gave him a cheeky grin and followed Paul from the room. Snape noticed then that Petunia was giving him a look very like Molly Weasley's look when he had threatened to fail Fred and George Weasley due to their lack of application in his class. She had known he was keeping something from her (mainly that her sons were brilliant potions students, or they would have been, had they applied themselves at all). Petunia Dursley wore that look now.

"Professor Snape, I do not know how you came to be here since you left this afternoon and Harry told me that he would continue to be safe here. What is obvious is that you know something about why my s-, nephew is like this, and I would like to know why!" Vernon Dursley made an abstract noise that sounded like he was agreeing with her, but Snape couldn't be sure. Muggles had strange methods of communication between husband and wife.

"I do not wish to commit myself to an explanation before I have all the facts, Mrs. Dursley. Once I examine a few of his things, I will be able to give you a firm decision as well as how he can be best helped." He told her. His words did not have a soothing effect of any kind, not that he had intended to do so. Sympathy could only hurt in the long run. The truth was best. She pulled a chair up next to Harry's bed and took the boy's hand in her own. She whispered something to the boy and ignored Snape's presence.

"I told you I could carry it, Drake." Paul's voice said as he wrestled a large box in through the doorway. The ghostly Slytherin walked behind him, pouting the slightest bit. It looked like Draco and Paul had made friends sometime in the last five minutes. "Here are the

things you requested.” He told Severus. Snape dropped to a knee and hunted through the box. Lying on top was a Mini-Messenger. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at Draco. Draco pretended ignorance at the small object. He had taught the boy well. Let him feign ignorance. He would be able to surprise Draco later with his own knowledge of the object. He searched through the schoolbooks, Potter’s wand, and a few boxes of wizarding sweets (his teeth would rot out eventually). Something towards the bottom of the box made him draw his wand. What was that and why did it have so many spells on it? He levitated the object, only to find that it was a book. A very old, very magical, and potentially dangerous book. He lowered it to the ground and spoke up to the others.

“Does anyone know what this is?” He demanded of the gathered group.

Paul looked it over and nodded. “That is the book Harry is studying this week. Something about wandless magic or along those lines.” Snape stared at the man in shock. Wandless magic? Without a master’s supervision? At sixteen? Potter truly had a death wish!

“Where did he get it?” He asked of Paul.

“Remus bought it for him.” Paul said, gesturing towards the sleeping werewolf. “He said it was about the history of wandless magic. He thought it might help Harry master his skill somehow.” Snape raised an eyebrow again.

“What skill?” He sneered as he lowered the book towards the ground. If Potter was lucky, then any skill he had displayed was due to the influence of the book and nothing else. If not...he hesitated to think what wandless magic could mean to Harry Potter, and those who sought to use him.

He waved his wand towards Potter and grunted to himself as his suspicions were confirmed. The boy and the book were linked. He could do nothing for Potter until either the book or Potter gave up in the fight for control. This newest development confirmed the idea Snape had had when he first examined Potter’s mind and found it to

be empty of any personality. Something or someone was in there with Potter, and Potter was being hidden from his own consciousness. Wonderful. "It's a repeat of his second year." Snape muttered as he stood and placed the book on the table next to the boy's bed.

"What do you mean?" Petunia asked.

Snape considered her for a minute. She was a very brave Muggle. "Your nephew, Mrs. Dursley, is currently possessed by that book. They are linked." Draco jumped. He had confessed to Snape that possession was the one thing he feared when it came to the Dark Lord. He had felt the Imperious Curse one too many times to feel secure about his own abilities. Snape glared at him before turning back to Petunia. Draco needed to get over that fear. Oh, the Muggle was still waiting. "There are many protection spells on the book at the moment. The most powerful one is Harry himself. If we try to destroy this book, we may destroy him as well." Snape explained in a quiet voice.

"So what do we do?" Petunia asked as she tried to keep calm.

"We wait." Snape told her. "He'll wake up eventually." Snape did not have to say what the other option was. Everyone seemed to know it already without needing him to articulate it.

Petunia stared down at her nephew with a worried expression. Harry would wake up, right? She glanced at Snape and the man seemed to know her question. He only shrugged. Some comfort there.

The doors banged open to reveal Sensei. "What is wrong with deshi?" he demanded. Snape motioned for Paul to explain, as it seemed that everyone in the room knew about Potter's secret. He froze when he heard the sensei's next word. "Hadrian?" He started to turn when he noticed that Potter was crying.

"I knew you were smart." Bleys said as he gave Harry a smirk worthy of Snape. "You figured it out. Now, you need to eat and then we can talk. Nothing until you eat." Harry stared at the man.

“How do I know I can trust you?” Harry demanded as he fought his way down from the ridiculously high bed. Really, couldn’t he re-gain his normal size? This small thing was getting annoying.

“You don’t. Not really. We are in your mind, after all. Figure it out.” Bleys settled down at a desk and proceeded to ignore Harry. Harry stared after the man in shock. First, he has nightmares, and now one of his nightmares comes true! Someone owed him big! His stomach kicked him again. Well, there was food and Bleys was not suffering any ill effects from his own cooking. Harry tried it and found it quite good, whatever it was. He figured it was a stew of some type. Fish? No, it wasn’t possible. It tasted too good. Bleys waved a hand after Harry had finished and the bowl and cup disappeared. “I suppose you would like to get cleaned up now?” He asked Harry as a door appeared. “There we are.” He motioned Harry to enter the room.

Harry peeped in and found a modern looking bathroom prepared for him. He gave a mental cheer for his subconscious. He could have a hot bath. “I’ll leave you to it. Clothes will be waiting for you when you are finished.” Bleys started to close the door, but paused and smiled at Harry. “Try not to think too much.” He told the boy. “It’ll confuse you. Allow me some time to explain.” Harry nodded and motioned for Bleys to close the door. Harry took care of some urgent business, climbed into the bath immediately after removing his now ridiculously large clothing, and cleared his mind. He had questions, yes, but they could wait. It didn’t look like he was going anywhere anytime soon. Bleys had de-aged him to teach him wandless magic. That much, he understood. But, how old was he, exactly?

Bleys carted him around like Harry weighed nothing. He had lifted him effortlessly before. Harry tried to remember when his hands had last looked this small. Eight? Nine? He had no idea. He sank beneath the water to wet his hair and started washing it. He wondered if he could somehow find hair gel to tame it until he figured out how to get out of his own mind. It felt different, though he couldn’t decide how it was different. He ducked under the water to rinse his hair and shook the water out of his eyes. He was surprised to find bubbles now in his bathtub. The water must have been charmed hot, for he lingered a

long while before deciding that he should get out. The water was still just as warm as when he started.

The clothes Bleys had promised were sitting on a low stool, though he was not sure when they had appeared. Everything looked like the robes Bleys wore. There was a pair of soft linen pants that stayed on through the method of drawstring, a loose shirt (he tucked it into the pants because loose clothing made him feel sloppy) and a heavy outer robe. Soft leather boots completed the look, though the boots were as comfortable as trainers. Harry decided that his hair was a lost cause. He left the bathroom and reentered the one room cottage. "Ah. Much better." Bleys said as he stood up to greet Harry. "Now, we can talk. What questions do you have for me?"

Harry climbed into a chair and faced Bleys. This wizard better have some really good explanations, because Harry was fed up with everyone else trying to run his life. If he missed the Halloween dance because of this, he was going to show everyone around him what it meant to be a moody teenager. If he missed the play, well, Bleys might not survive. "I understand that you are Bleys and that you're here to teach me something." Bleys nodded in a sage way and smiled. What was with all the smiles? "What I don't understand is how you are here. You died, well, a very long time ago. You should be dust." Bleys let out a loud bark of laughter at Harry's statement.

"You're right, Master Potter. I should be dust. I am dust, in a sense." Bleys told him as he poured boiling water into cups. "I believe that you had an adventure concerning a book with a mind of its own." Harry nodded. He had done something of the sort in his second year. "I am a memory left behind in a book. This is a little complicated, so try not to interrupt until I finish explaining." Harry motioned for him to continue.

"It was right after my third student, Zendal, when I noticed that I was getting old. My students were off making accomplishments of their own. No one needed a sorcerer anymore, not since Merlin popularized the use of wands and staffs. I used Sight to find those who would need my art eventually. It took a long while. I found you, and a few others, far ahead into the future. There was no way I could

bring you to me, and no way could I travel to you. I created my book and sealed a piece of my soul into it, so that you, and various others throughout your history, would be able to learn wandless magic with a guide." Bleys stopped his narrative and gestured for Harry to ask his question.

"There are others?" Harry asked. "Others who can do wandless magic?" Harry hoped to hear about others who had his uncontrollable talents.

"None as powerful as you." Well, darn. Harry Potter couldn't be normal even among the abnormal. He wanted to cry again, but turned his attention back to Bleys. "They can do a few parlor tricks. Light a candle, float a feather. You, however, are different." Bleys told him with a large smile. "You are an enigma."

"Story of my life." Harry muttered to himself. He hated his life. Except when he was acting. Or drawing. Or working with Sensei. Or watching Star Wars. Okay, so maybe it wasn't entirely bad, but it was not perfect, or normal in any sense of the word. He felt the need for mint chocolate chip ice cream with Sensei. And cake. It must be a kid thing, because he had a craving for anything sweet.

"Yes. An enigma. You are not even fully mature and already such a handle of magic. You have instinct, and that is sometimes more important than anything else." Bleys stood and handed Harry a cup of hot water. Oh, it was tea. Better than nothing, Harry supposed. He took a sip and sighed. It was mint tea.

"I don't want to be different." Harry told him. Harry's mentality was telling him that different was the worst thing he could be. "If you could just restore me to consciousness and leave me alone, I'd be grateful. I'm sure Paul is worried about me." Harry told the eccentric wizard. Harry stopped at that point. Paul went frantic over a spaghetti shortage. He hated to think what the man was doing now.

"You should accept what you are. You'll be much happier that way." Bleys said as he fed the owl he kept in the corner. Harry rolled his eyes and dropped to his feet. He hated being short.

“Yes, well. That’s a nice sentiment, but I’m ready to return to my own mind, thank you.” Harry told Bleys in a tone that would not allow argument. He did not receive an argument. He received an ultimatum.

Bleys turned to Harry with an odd look. “The boy truly doesn’t understand.” He whispered to himself. Harry gave him an odd look. “You do not understand why I am here.”

“No.” Harry told him. “I don’t.” Bleys looked him over with a concerned look.

“Wandless magic cannot be performed by just anyone, Master Potter.” Bleys’s voice dropped to a menacing whisper as he edged closer to Harry. “It is not like other magic. This magic can destroy you.” Oh, dear. “It can be slow, leeching out your life force, or it can be as quick as lightning.” Bleys snapped his fingers to illustrate his point. “You do not realize how volatile this magic is, or how close you came to being ruined.”

Harry was not sure if it was the words themselves, or the way Bleys said them, but he found that he was shaking the slightest bit. “You have no choice now, Master Potter. You need me far more than you can know, just to ensure your survival. The doors you have opened will continue to drain you until nothing is left.” Harry stared at Bleys, unwilling to listen further, but unable to stop. “You can no longer afford to pretend that everything will work out without taking some kind of steps to guarantee your survival. Without those steps, you sacrifice yourself...and those who care about you.” The faces of his friends swam up before Harry. He grabbed onto the chair and held onto it as an anchor. “You need my training more than anything else right now. I’ve taken away every obstacle towards wandless magic. Your body, at five years old, is young enough to adapt to any physical changes that may happen. Your mind is flexible enough inside itself. The only obstacle left...is you. The Boy Who Lived.” Bleys dropped to a knee in front of Harry so that he could meet the boy’s eyes. “I will tear your mask apart, only to rebuild you, and not the mask, to such vitality that it will be palpable in the air around you.” Bleys took hold of Harry’s shoulders and held him at arms’ length. “You will be powerful,

more so than you could ever hope to imagine. Voldemort himself will fear you.” Harry shook harder at the words. He didn’t want it. He didn’t want any of it.

Bleys must have known how much his words had scared Harry, for he gathered the boy in his arms and held him. Harry did not protest. He would have preferred Paul, or Aunt Petunia, since he had broken down in her arms, but this was better than nothing. “That is why you are here. Your power would have come upon you eventually, at full strength, and most likely during a time of great distress.” Harry’s fogged mind flashed back to the odd moments in Paul’s office where he could see his own breath. Was that what Bleys meant? “It could have destroyed you, my child. I am here to help you.” Why did Bleys seem so familiar? It felt like Paul was holding him. Bleys moved a hand in small circles on Harry’s back, relaxing the boy to his tears. “It will be alright, child.”

Harry shook his head in a determined fashion. “I don’t want it.” He whispered through his tears. “I don’t want to be powerful.” He told Bleys angrily. “I just want to be normal.” Bleys settled on a couch-like object that would have made Aunt Petunia cringe. Bleys seemed to prefer function over fashion. He held Harry close to him and Harry felt calming waves surround him. That was...nice. He didn’t want it to stop.

“I know. I know it’s frightening.” Bleys whispered to him in a soothing voice. “Merlin was the same way, you know.” He told Harry with a conspiratorial air.

Harry took a deep breath to calm his tears (where had they come from, anyway?) and looked up at Bleys in a way that only five year olds can manage. “Really?” He asked.

Bleys reminded himself that wizards in Harry’s day and age practically worshipped his former student. This could work. He nodded and gave a smile. “Oh, yes. I found him at a very young age, a little younger than you are now. He was a good student, attentive and inquisitive, and was like a son to me. His first display of wandless magic so frightened him that he refused to leave the house. He hid

under that bed,” he gestured towards the bed in which Harry had woken, “and refused to come out, even for meals. He begged me to just take it all away, to make him normal, just Merlin.” Bleys paused for a moment. “If I had the power, I would have. Unfortunately, that is one of the few things denied to me.” He told the boy who had settled on his lap.

“Just Merlin?” Harry asked as he wrapped his robe around himself.

“Just Merlin.” Bleys agreed. “You and he are a lot alike.” Bleys wrapped an arm around Harry and brought the young body to rest against him. Harry did not protest and relaxed against him. “You look the same. You’re both adorable when you’re young.” Harry scowled. Bleys pretended not to notice. “You both want to be normal, only to have something great thrust upon you without a by your leave.” Bleys smiled and Harry noticed that the skin around his eyes wrinkled just the slightest bit. “Are you feeling better now, Master Potter?” He asked.

“Please, just call me Harry.” Harry told Bleys as he toyed with the edge of his robe. Bleys smiled crinkled his eyes again.

“If you will call me Bleys.” Harry nodded as Bleys patted his back. Harry realized then that he was still sitting on the man’s lap and that Bleys was treating him as a child of the age to which he had been regressed, but he found that he couldn’t care. It felt good, this camaraderie he felt with someone who understood his powers and accepted them. For the first time since discovering these powers, he was unafraid of what they would bring. He had help now.

Author's Note: Okay guys. There it is. I'm off to work on homework. Good news! I got a 94 on my German test!

Author's Note: Thanks to all who reviewed. I love reviews. And the well-wishers about my grades. I plan to continue studying, though I have a paper due in two weeks. And another one two weeks after that. Yeah, it'll kill me. Anyway, here's the next chapter. I don't know if you all noticed the review responses, but I'll be using that to answer questions! Expect some answers soon!

Harry had been with Bleys a period of a week. Mere seconds passed for days in his mind and he had started to enjoy learning what the man had to teach, though he still hated the necessity of making him young again. He tripped over his feet daily, which caused Bleys an inordinate amount of amusement. Harry had been stretching his new abilities by catching fish outside in the nearby creek when Bleys called him back to the cottage. It felt like a vacation here. Bleys made everything into a game with Harry and Harry often didn't realize the fact that he was actually working until he collapsed into his bed that night.

Harry had been wary of Bleys the first few "days" they had spent together. Bleys was, after all, an unknown and Harry was not sure if he could trust something that came from a book, no matter how nice it seemed. Ginny Weasley's experiences were always in the back of his mind, just waiting for Harry to look over them and try to compare the two. The only thing that allowed Harry to relax was the fact that they were in his mind and not Bleys. Snape had told him that lies could not exist here and that Harry controlled everything. Harry had found that to be true. He had turned Bleys's hair pink once while the man was sleeping, just to prove that he was in control. The man had not been happy when he woke up, but understood Harry's need for safety confirmation.

Time was what really concerned Harry, but Bleys promised that only a few hours would pass for the required number of weeks Harry needed to complete his lessons. Eleven hours, to be precise, for eleven weeks. He could still go to the dance and he would make the play. Somehow, they seemed far away from Harry's mind. It didn't really matter. What did matter was learning how to control this power he felt twitching behind his hands and eyes at odd moments. Bleys had been right. Now that he had opened himself to what he could really accomplish, the power wouldn't leave him alone. It tugged on

him and wore him out, but each day taught Harry a new skill that helped to reign in the power, direct it, and give his mind a rest. He could cast without a wand. He only needed hand gestures. His favorite was snapping his fingers. He had left incantations behind a long time ago.

“Ah, there you are. Come here, Harry.” Harry dropped his basket of fish just outside the door and went over to Bleys. The man was watching something on the table. “Do you know what this is, child?” Harry glared at the man, whom returned the glare with a fond smile. Bleys knew Harry hated being called a child. Harry looked down at the object.

“A scrying mirror?” He asked. Bleys gave him that pleased smile Harry had earned many times since he had first allowed the man to teach him something his second day in the cottage. That had been a frightening experience. Bleys had shown him how easy it was to focus on his magic, but had forgotten to tell Harry how to shut it off. Bleys had sat through some rather terrifying minutes while Harry made objects fly about the little cottage. Once Harry had worked out how to stop it, Bleys had smiled. He told Harry that he had been just like Merlin. Harry had returned with a threat to hide under the bed for the man’s neglect in giving some vital instructions. Bleys’s answer to his earlier response pulled Harry from his thoughts.

“That’s right. A scrying mirror. I think it’s time you learned how to use one.” Bleys told him. “Have you any of the basics?” He asked.

Harry shook his head. “I’m useless at Divination.” He told Bleys. It was true. Even Professor Firenze told Harry that Sight did not favor him. Harry said as much to Bleys.

“Yes, the centaur had it right. The Sight does not favor you. It belongs to you. I thought you read my notes?” He asked Harry, giving the boy a slight cuff to the head. Harry smoothed his hair back as Bleys motioned a chair over for Harry.

“I did.” Harry told him. “I don’t see what that has to do with my skills at Divination.” Harry sat down in the chair as it nudged against his

legs. It had taken him two days to get used to furniture that acted as though it had a life of its own (it was the chairs, mostly, though his bed had hugged him that morning before he was released to dress).

“Everything.” Bleys’ exasperated voice said from behind his hands, where he had hidden his face in a calming technique. “Magic is only limited by your limitations. You need no wand; therefore, you have no need of limitations. Do not allow yourself to accept limitations. They are false boundaries.” Bleys gave Harry a sardonic smile after he quoted his own notes. “Sound familiar?” He asked.

“Yes, actually.” There was no need to be sarcastic! “So, if I decide that I can use Divination...”

“You can. Precisely right.” Bleys told him. “Now, scry.” Harry closed his eyes to concentrate and felt his magic gather and question his intent. This had been the scariest thing to feel when he had started with Bleys. Wandless magic before had rushed through him. This was a slow congregation of his magic that asked what he wanted to happen before anything could happen outside him. Harry had been terrified, at first, of the feeling of power at his fingertips (and had collapsed in fear in Bleys’s arms before he mastered this necessary skill) but now he found it soothing. Familiar, in a way.

Harry opened his eyes and turned them down to the mirror. An image formed, surprising him to no little end. He had managed to use something from Divination! There were truly no limitations. He looked down at his Aunt Petunia as she sat next to his hospital bed. He missed his sixteen year old body. Bleys refused to allow him to grow, annoying the teenager to moody silence common among those his age. He did, however, retain his mind and used it to annoy the other man. “Aunt Petunia’s here, Harry. I’m not going to leave you to go through this alone.” Harry watched as she stroked his hair and squeezed his hand. “Aunt Petunia is here, dear.” Harry froze as he watched her face, unconsciously nudging his magic to change the view to see her instead of his body. “I’m right here.”

Harry pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on them. His aunt looked so different from what he was used to. Was this what

she was like when he was asleep? When he had been little? He felt an ache in his chest as he watched her stroke his hair. Vernon Dursley came up behind her. "Any change?" His voice asked.

"None." Petunia told him. Vernon looked awkward, but patted her shoulder in a manner meant to soothe her. "I'm so worried, Vernon."

"I know, Petunia. You say he's been through things before. I'm sure he'll come through this. It'd be like him to do so." His voice held the slightest bit of contempt. Petunia shook her head.

"You promised me you'd try." Petunia told him.

"I am. I don't understand all of this," He waved a vague hand about. "stuff and nonsense. I'll be civil to the boy if it'll make you happy. I promise you that. At least he's polite." Vernon told her as he patted Harry's foot. "I do like that about him." Vernon told his wife that he was going to get something for her to drink.

"He is trying, Harry." Petunia whispered to the boy in front of her. "He promised me that he would try." She sounded almost desperate. "I have a bit of a surprise when you come home, dear." She told him. "I think you'll like it. Hermione gave me the idea. She told me that you liked to fly on your broomstick." Harry couldn't watch anymore. He wiped his hand across the surface of the mirror, dissipating the image like an image on water. He wrapped his hands around his legs more securely and buried his face. Bleys had forbidden any suppression of emotions, so Harry was prepared to show the man just how much of an emotional roller coaster he was. Bleys stood and picked up Harry from his chair and settled onto the couch-like object. Bleys called it a couch, but it was not like any couch Harry had ever seen.

"What is wrong, child?" He asked Harry as the boy wrapped his arms around Bleys neck and allowed himself to cry on the larger man's chest. Harry shook his head and rested against Bleys. He felt safe and that's all that was important at the moment. "Hmm?"

"She really does..." Harry took a shuddering breath. "does love me."

Bleys raised both eyebrows before cradling Harry to his chest. He had been able to view a few memories of Harry's before the boy had appeared for him. Some of them disturbed him, while others made him smile. The most confusing ones were those that contained any of his relatives. Harry had had mixed feelings about the trio since he was a little child. There was a yearning for acceptance and love, a desperate shield constructed against them, and a deep seated dislike of anything to do with them. Bleys had worked out what it all meant and was only starting to make sense of it. How could anyone do such things to a boy for his own "protection"? Bleys decided that only those who loved a child could do something so against their nature to keep him safe. He had to remind himself that the Dursley males had taken it a bit far. Petunia, however, was the main mystery. He stroked Harry's hair and nodded against the boy's head. "That she does." Bleys said quietly as he rubbed Harry's back.

"She never told me when I was younger." Harry mumbled from under Bleys's robe. The sorcerer wondered how Harry had managed to bury himself so effectively. He dug the boy out and replaced him on his chest before wrapping the robe about the boy as well. Harry relaxed, drinking in the physical affection the man was giving him. He wondered if this was what it felt like to have a father. Would his own have held him this way? Bleys reached out and brushed the tears away from Harry's face.

"I have no doubt that she has loved you all your life." Bleys told the boy. "She was just afraid of what would happen if she showed that she loved you, when she knew that you belonged to a different world. It's so hard to see the child that you raised go off into a world entirely separate from your own." Harry nodded and looked up. Bleys must have had an experience or two similar to what Petunia was going through. He understood that. He had read all of Petunia's journals and understood his aunt's reasoning, as odd as it was. It made sense. He just wished it had been unnecessary. So much had been wasted. "However, you must concern yourself with neither the past nor the future. Focus only on the present. The past shaped you, yes, but it does not control who you are now." He told Harry. "The past will control you if you allow it." Harry sat up and nodded. "Are you a bit calmer now?" He asked. Harry nodded again. "Good. Go wash your

face before the mirror starts to scream.” Harry clambered down from the couch and went over towards the washstand. The mirror badgered both of them about their looks, Harry more than Bleys, and screamed when it thought Harry was looking particularly unkempt.

He poured water into the basin and thought about his past. True, it had not been a very good one, but it had been better than some might have been. He could have grown up with a pureblood family, like the Malfoys. He shuddered. He was eternally grateful a wizard had not been able to adopt him. He realized that the Dursleys had only done what they thought was right, no matter how misguided they actually had been in his upbringing.

Remus had given him a list of all the people who had wanted to adopt Harry when his parents died. Almost every wizarding family he knew of, including some he had only heard of but never met had petitioned to become his guardians. Yes, even the Malfoys and the Notts. That would have been a frightening childhood, no matter how pampered and spoiled he would have been, because that was what he would have received. The wizarding world would have demanded it. He guessed it was better to be a little neglected than fawned over. He did not have a big head and he was not spoiled. He knew that he was not better than anyone else, and did not expect favors of any kind for his celebrity status. He didn't use his celebrity status unless he had to and even then, did not enjoy doing it. He was as normal as he could hope to be. As normal as he could be. The Dursleys had been right, partly, in the way they had raised him. He could have used a bit of self-esteem building, though. Hindsight was not useful.

He finished washing his face and went back outside to retrieve the fish he had caught earlier. Bleys had promised fish for dinner that night, and since Harry was 'eating him out of house and home', he had taught Harry ways to catch fish. Using magic, of course. "Light the fire." Bleys told him as he accepted the fish from Harry. Harry nodded and moved over to the fireplace. Harry snapped his fingers at the logs and watched them spring to life. He tilted his head to the side and smiled. That was easy. The flames suddenly went out. "I thought I asked you to light a fire?" Bleys said from the table as he was preparing the fish. Harry frowned and snapped his fingers again. The logs were lit once more. He started to turn when he heard the fire go

out. "Is the wood wet?" Bleys said innocently. Harry narrowed his eyes and turned back to the fireplace. This was one of Bleys's games. He was sure of that. He was missing something. Bleys was trying to make a point. What was it?

Harry watched Bleys for a few minutes as he moved utensils around with magic to cut the fish and vegetables. A bowl came towards Bleys without an outward appearance of a hand gesture or word. Show off. Doing spells without words or snapping his fingers or a wand...OH! That's what Bleys wanted him to do! Harry sank down on his heels in front of the fireplace and stared at the logs. He felt the feeling again as his magic gathered and asked his intention. He imagined the flames back on the logs. He was surprised when Bleys grabbed him from the floor and pulled him away from the flames that had threatened his robe.

"A little too much power there." He told Harry with a proud smile. "That was well done for a first try. We're going to have to practice that." He set Harry on his feet once the flames had returned to normal.

"I hate being little." Harry grumbled to any force willing to listen.

"You're so cute this way!" Bleys told him as he messed up Harry's hair...again. Harry had quit wishing for hair gel. It would never last with Bleys around. "Get the bread, would you?" He asked Harry as he moved back to the vegetables. Harry took a towel and maneuvered the bread pans out of the little stove Bleys had built. He burned himself slightly, enough to make him jerk, but not enough to be concerned about. He shook his hand as he placed the bread on the table, far away from the vegetables. "Thank you, Harry." Harry nodded and watched Bleys for a few seconds. A scratch at the door made Harry jump. "Could you get the door, please?" Bleys asked with a small smile.

"We're in my mind, and there's somebody at the door?" He asked as he started for the door.

"I've brought a few friends along. My owl, for instance. And..."

“Argh!” Harry shouted as a gigantic dog leapt onto him the minute the door was open. The animal immediately started licking his face and neck, tickling him in the process. “Help!” Harry squealed from under the dog. “He’s trying to eat me!” Harry was sure that the call for help would have been taken more seriously had he not been laughing at the time.

“Alden, down boy.” Bleys told the dog. The newly named Alden wagged his tail and left Harry alone. The boy sat up and scrubbed at his face as he nudged the dog away from him.

“You forgot to mention that you had a dog.” Harry said dryly. Bleys only smirked. “I’ve been here a week and haven’t seen him.”

“He disappears so often that I sometimes forget he exists.” Bleys explained to Harry as the dog started circling Bleys. “Did you have a good time out causing mischief?” Bleys asked the animal. The dog barked once and wagged his tail.

“What kind of dog is he?” Harry asked as he looked over the animal.

“Mm. Not sure. He’s a mix of everything, I think. He was the runt of the litter when I received him. I was advised to drown him but his eyes told me a different story. He’s a familiar and a very nice companion.” Alden barked and wagged his tail once.

“Mental.” Harry muttered as he helped Bleys assemble their soup for the evening. Variety did not happen here. The meals were pretty much all the same. Soups and stews with bread. Fresh fruit and raw vegetables often accompanied the meal, and milk appeared from somewhere (Harry was sure that Bleys had a cow stored in secret) that Harry was forced to drink...with every meal. Breakfast was usually simple. Harry devoured a large piece of cheese, a hard roll, an apple or pear and a cup of milk every morning at Bleys’s instructions. Lunch and dinner were often the same type of food, though Harry had taught Bleys about dumplings. He hoped that they would be included on the menu sometime soon. Harry had yet to see meat, besides fish, of any kind. He vowed that he would never eat fish again once he returned to his body.

Bleys told stories throughout dinner about some of his adventures and several of his students' as well. They kept Harry entertained while they were eating. He often asked about Merlin, as the two of them sounded very similar in personality. Merlin had wanted nothing more than to be "just Merlin" and Harry had been fighting for it since he entered the wizarding world. It scared him to see the adoring looks on the younger years' faces when they arrived at Hogwarts. It was even worse when the same look appeared on the faces of adults. It made him want to hide and never come out. He jumped as he felt something cold touch his hand. He looked down to see Alden next to his chair, wagging his tail. What did the dog want?

"He can sense your mood, you know." Bleys told him nonchalantly. "What were you thinking about?" Bleys asked.

"Wizards." That was the truth.

"A certain group of wizards, or in general?" Bleys tore off a piece of bread and used it to sop up some gravy. Harry studied his own bowl. "Don't suppress it!" Bleys snapped. That habit had to stop.

"Keep your shirt on." Harry told him. "I was getting there." Bleys only raised an eyebrow. "I was thinking about the wizards that stare at me because of what my mum did for me."

"Ah, I see. What about them?"

Harry shrugged as he tried to put his feelings into words. "They think I'm so special for it. I'm not." He told Bleys.

"People see what they want to see." Bleys said as he patted Harry's hand to make the boy unclench it. "It is up to you to allow them to see such things, or shatter their illusions." Bleys kept an eye on Harry as he took a sip from his cup.

Harry bit his bottom lip and pushed his hair back. "I know. The mask is so convenient sometimes." Harry explained. "It's easier to let them see what they want to see, rather than try to change their minds."

Harry was reminded of the mask in his dream. That had been an unpleasant experience. Alden rubbed against his leg, causing Harry to reach down and scratch the dog behind his ears.

“Yes, it is easy. I think Paul would call it a persona. Mask, no matter what language you use. It is a necessary item for survival. We all have them.” Bleys’s bowl and cup disappeared. “The important thing to remember, something you forgot, is where you begin and the mask stops.” Bleys stared into the flames and gave a smile in Harry’s direction. “Do not become the mask. You use the mask. Not the other way around.”

Harry nodded as he pushed away his bowl. Bleys glanced at it and shook his head. “Three more bites, and finish your bread and milk.” He told the boy.

“I’m not hungry anymore.” Harry said quietly.

“Just the milk. You’re still growing.” Harry glared.

“That’s your fault.” Harry said as he picked up his cup. “I was sixteen.”

“You still are. There’s no reason not to add a bit to your height while you’re here.”

Harry stared at his teacher, completely horrified. “The costume crew will kill me! I can’t grow anymore!”

Bleys chuckled at his distress. “You’re already managing to add some height. A side effect from the de-aging, I’m afraid. Did you finish?” He took Harry’s cup from him and inspected it. “Ah, good.”

“They’re going to kill me.” Harry said in a whisper as he stared at the table.

“This from the boy who faced Voldemort and won?” He asked. Harry glared at him and tossed a roll at his head.

Hermione snatched her second Mini Messenger and opened it. It had flashed once, indicating that she had a new message from Remus. Perhaps he could explain why Harry wasn't answering...

Mi:

Harry is in some kind of magical coma. He is currently possessed by a book I thought was a simple history book. Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy are here. They are to be trusted. Both are PPs now. I will notify you the moment there is a change.

-Moony

Hermione shut the Messenger and sighed. It looked like she would be getting any sleep tonight. She would only worry once the lights went out. She moved over to a corner and settled at the table there to study. She may as well use the time to her advantage. She could get a little further ahead in her studies. PPs took up a lot of her time and she had no excuse if she fell behind. She was halfway into her Potions assignment when she heard a noise. What was that?

"Shh!" a voice came from the girls' tower. "You'll wake everyone." Hermione decided her corner was sufficiently hidden and waited to see who this was.

"Where are we meeting tonight?" Another voice whispered.

"Ravenclaw." The first answered. Hermione recognized the form of Sophie Matthews.

"Oh." The second voice was Sybill Vane, another Gryffindor in her year. A boy came from the boys' stairwell and yawned.

"Alright, let's go." Sophie said as she led her two classmates to the portrait. Hermione stood and followed them. She cast a Disillusionment charm on her self and watched as the first years started towards Ravenclaw. What could that mean? Were they really going to the Ravenclaw dorm, or was the word code for something

else? They stopped at the appropriate space. "Experience gives wisdom." They were going to the dorm! The door opened from them. Hermione stood in shock as the students entered. Why would first year students give each other passwords to the other dormitories? They were guarded as jealous secrets.

She made her decision and walked up to the entrance. "Experience gives wisdom." The door opened. Hermione stepped in and looked around. There were students from every house and mostly the younger years. The entire group fell silent as they realized who she was. "I don't know how you did it, or why, but I am impressed." She told the group. Everyone seemed to relax the slightest bit. Sophie stood up and waved at Hermione. "Hi, Sophie."

"You followed me, huh?" The younger girl said. Hermione only raised an eyebrow. "I knew I should have looked up stealth charms." She told herself.

"Why are you all meeting?" Hermione asked. Everyone glanced around to the others.

"We're a society. A dramatists' society. We become characters." Sophie explained.

"A theatre group?" Hermione asked. Sophie squinted one eye and nodded slightly.

"Something like that. We do what is needed." Sophie told her. "Acting is a hobby." Hermione took another glance around and realized something.

"My goodness, you're organized." She gasped. Sophie giggled the slightest bit.

"Yes, we are. Just like you, Miss Head PP." Hermione blanched and turned fully to stare at Sophie.

“Pardon?” Hermione asked. Many of the kids laughed, making Hermione glance towards the hallways where the rest of the Ravenclaw dorm was asleep. Sophie saw her look and smiled.

“The Spell Casters took care of that. Dumbledore himself can’t hear us.” Sophie told her. “We know about your group. You know where Harry Potter is. You also head up the newspaper. We all have copies by the way.” Several of the students lifted the newspapers into the air.

“What, precisely, do you do, Sophie?” Hermione asked. Sophie winked at a Ravenclaw boy who stood and introduced himself.

“My name is Alan Wiggins. We are training ourselves. The Protectors all told us stories in our DADA classes and we wanted to be prepared. We can do a lot of things now, but we don’t have a lot of guidance. The Dramatists’ Society is our cover. We’re really a group like the Protectors, without some of their attitudes. We can’t let Vol-, ah, the Dark Lord-“

“Say his name.” Hermione interrupted. “He’s not going to come and grab you. Voldemort!” Hermione looked around and shrugged. “Voldemort!”

“Right. Voldemort. We can’t let Voldemort win.” Alan continued. “He doesn’t deserve to win.” The second year finished. Applause scattered around the room. “We do whatever is needed. We’re young, but we’re strong. If we’re needed to fight, we’ll fight. If we’re needed to run errands, we’ll do that. We’ll do whatever is needed. We just don’t want to be pushed aside when our assistance may help in saving lives.”

Hermione looked around at the gathered students. These children had succeeded where the older years had failed. They had truly united for one cause. They had united against Voldemort. Hermione felt like she was going to cry. “I think I can help you.” She told them. “Sophie, meet me first thing in the common room. Before breakfast.” Hermione smiled and nodded to the entire group. “Have a good meeting.” She turned and left them alone. She made her way back to

Gryffindor in a thoughtful mood. The children of Hogwarts had united, not for someone, but against someone. She could not be happier.

Author's Note: Happy Thanksgiving to those who celebrate it! I'll see you all again soon!

Author's Notes: Wow! Thanks for all the reviews and encouragement. It helped this past week. I'm afraid this chapter will be the last for the next two weeks or so. I have finals coming up the second week of December and although I had already started to prepare for them, I do not feel ready and must continue studying. I will update my first day of winter vacation. See you then!

“Harry, come along.” Harry looked up from his books and wondered what it was that Bleys wanted. He never interrupted Harry when he was reading. Harry marked his place and pulled on his outer robe as he went outside the cottage.

“What is it?” He asked as his eyes adjusted to the light.

“You need some exercise. I’m feeling the need for some venison. We are going hunting.” Harry stood with the bow in his hand, feeling just the slightest bit foolish. He was likely to kill Bleys by tripping over it. Sensei would be cringing in a very comical way if he could see Harry now. Harry had no idea how to use that weapon and the number one rule of weapons was not to handle a weapon you did not know how to use..

“I don’t know how to use this.” He said, holding it up. Better to tell the man and get it over with than do something that could possibly result in maiming or death. Bleys smirked and dropped his robe on the doorstep. It looked like Harry was not going to get an understanding mentor today. How he wanted to go back to his book!

“It’s time you learned.” Harry stared at him. People just didn’t use bows and arrows anymore, much less hunted (unless they wanted to). He wondered how much Bleys had poked around in his head before he had woken up. “Get rid of that robe, you don’t need it.” Harry folded his own robe next to Bleys’s and accepted the quiver of arrows as Bleys led him into the forest. This was going to end in disaster. Harry knew it. Alright, so technically, they couldn’t really get hurt because they were trapped in Harry’s mind, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t feel pain. Harry had burned himself here before, and skinned knees (from the fact that he grew a bit more everyday) reminded him that pain was inescapable. If he followed logic, then death, technically,

was still possible. Harry had never wished for a mistake in his logic before this. He hoped that he was wrong.

“What, exactly, am I looking for?” He asked as he lengthened his own stride to keep up with Bleys, frustration leaking through his voice though he had tried to hold it back. He was ten years old now and was enjoying the addition to his height, though Bleys still outpaced him easily.

“Deer.” Bleys answered shortly. “Or rabbit. Any game will do. I’m tired of fish.” Small wonder. They had been eating fish for weeks. “Try to keep up, Harry. You have longer legs now. Use them.” Bleys said as he adjusted the quiver across his own back. Harry glared at the man’s back. It wasn’t his fault that he was short! Bleys had done it. Harry liked being sixteen. And tall!

“Why aren’t we using magic?” Harry asked. He figured that magic would be a lot easier than this...primitive method of procuring food. Bleys had taught Harry how to catch fish with magic. Why would deer be any different? Bleys did not answer. Harry shrugged and followed the man, thoroughly lost by now. He doubted that he would be able to find his own way out if he needed to. He couldn’t make landmarks when all he could see was Bleys’ back and a few scraggly branches over his head. He decided that Bleys would tell him why they weren’t using magic when Bleys was ready. If he ever was ready. Harry could see when the man spotted what he was looking for. Bleys relaxed into a crouch and gestured Harry down next to him. He pointed through the bushes. There in the clearing was a deer. Bleys notched an arrow and let it fly. The deer startled and ran from the arrow. So, it was not as easy as Bleys had implied. Good. Maybe then, Bleys would give up this idea of weapons and use magic. It made everything so much easier.

“Blast.” Bleys whispered. He stood from his crouch and gestured Harry to follow him as quietly as possible. Harry followed Bleys around for a while until they came to another deer. Bleys motioned for Harry to take a shot. Harry pulled out an arrow and notched it as Bleys had shown him earlier. “Lock your left arm.” He whispered. Harry followed his instructions. “Pull back.” Harry pulled back until

Bleys stopped him. Harry was staring down the arrow at the deer. Was he actually going to do this? Bleys opened one hand and Harry followed the instructions. The arrow left the string and struck the deer right in the neck. Bleys sent a second arrow just after Harry's and smiled when he saw that the animal fell. Bleys left the bushes and took out his knife.

"I didn't think I could do it." Harry said as he sank down in the bushes. Bleys cocked an eyebrow at him as he cleaned his knife. "I killed it." Harry sat and stared at the bushes around him. Why did Bleys insist upon his doing it? Bleys was the better shot.

"Are all boys from your time this squeamish about death?" Bleys asked as he moved the deer around into a better position. "It is better for the deer, in the long run." Bleys told him.

Harry stood. "How is it better? It's dead." He demanded as he dropped the bow. He never wanted to use it again. He would go to the market like everyone else.

"Better to die a quick death than one of starvation, don't you think?" Bleys asked as he picked up the deer. "Some consider this mercy."

"What?" Harry was terribly confused. What did that have to do with anything?

Bleys gathered himself and sighed. "Don't they teach you anything about how the world works?" Bleys asked rhetorically as he motioned for Harry to get the weapons. Harry gathered them reluctantly and followed as Bleys turned back in the general direction of the cottage. Bleys gave off an air of one preparing for a difficult discussion and not too happy about it all.

"Animals will continue to reproduce until something checks that reproduction. Most of the time, man does it, whether through hunting or some other means. If the animals were not hunted, their population would explode, leading to a slow death through either starvation or disease. This way, man gets something new to eat, and the entire population of deer does not starve or die from disease." Bleys led

Harry through the woods and back towards the cottage. Harry swatted errant branches away from his face as they flew back from being pushed aside by Bleys. This was not fun. He hated being short. "It's all about balance. Sometimes a population becomes indolent, diseased, and sick and must die out. This looks like a terrible catastrophe, but it helps in the end, because the next generation is stronger, healthier, and more likely to adapt to new demands. Once that population becomes lazy, the next rises to take its place."

"We've stopped talking about deer, haven't we?" Harry asked as he followed behind Bleys. Something was ticking in Harry's mind, calling up certain wizards to his mental eye.

"Yes. Do you know what I'm talking about now?" Bleys asked as he put the deer down behind the cottage. "Get me a pail of water. Non-magically." Harry rolled his eyes and retrieved the water.

"My wizarding world?" Harry guessed as he returned from the well with the requested pail of water. Bleys accepted it and smiled at Harry before turning back to continue in his work with the deer..

"Exactly. The wizards have become lazy, doing what is easy, rather than what is right." Bleys started to disassemble the deer, showing Harry little tricks that made the work go faster and that Harry was sure he would never need again. "They allow the prejudices of others to grow and expand, to color their tidy little world with violence and despair, and then wonder how things came to such a difficult end." Bleys shook his head as he started to cut the meat into strips. Harry wondered how he was going to get the blood out of his clothes. He was literally covered in it, almost up to his eyebrows. "I find wizards from your time fascinating. They have forgotten something important about the wizard Merlin that is so important to them." He explained.

"What have they forgotten?" Harry asked as he got his own hands dirty at Bleys' instructions. This was interesting, but also incredibly disgusting at the same time. Harry scratched his face and found that he had only succeeded in getting blood on his face. Ugh. He wanted a hot bath with lots of soap. Alden came bounding out of the house and started sniffing round the pair as they worked. "Down, Alden."

Alden dropped back on his haunches and waited patiently for his human to be done with the task so they could play. He loved playing with the short one and could almost see the stick he would chase.

“Merlin was a half-blood, too.” Bleys said with a smile as he turned away from the dog. “Most of us are. There are not enough for us to go around marrying each other. Every one of my students has been a half-blood. The purebloods from your time, well, they strike me as hopelessly backwards. Only those who wish for decay wishes to marry their own cousins.” Bleys gave a theatrical shudder. Harry snorted and took his bundle inside the house as Bleys directed.

“Are you a half-blood?” Harry asked as Bleys entered from behind him.

Bleys stopped and considered Harry for a few minutes. “I’m not really sure. I never knew my parents. I grew up with a kind wizard who took me in when I was rather young. I vaguely remember being on my own, but I cannot remember how long I was, nor how old I was when that happened. He told me that I was a magical child and must be trained. I accepted it. I knew I could do odd things and welcomed the chance to control it, because I had no control at all before that. I like to think I am a half-blood. I can’t imagine any wizard married to a witch.” Harry smiled as Bleys started to put things away in their place in the little cottage. He looked down at Harry for a moment before smiling. “Go play with Alden, before he drives me mad with his sniffing.”

Harry looked down at his robes and then back up at Bleys. The man couldn’t be serious. He was covered in blood, much like his teacher. He needed to clean up first. Bleys rolled his eyes and motioned with one hand. The boy could be so vain about his appearance sometimes. Harry found himself cleaned up after the gesture. Bleys nudged him to the door and shut it behind him. “Don’t come back until sunset. You’ve been studying too much!” Harry almost argued, but decided that it would make him too much like Hermione. Alden jumped up and down in place beside him, practically wagging his tail off in excitement.

“Go get a stick.” Harry said with a smile. He liked the dog and wondered if he would get one when he was older. The animal had a wicked personality. Alden bounded off with a happy bark and came back with a stick. Harry accepted the stick and tossed it for the dog. Harry started walking as Alden dashed off for his stick. Bleys had allowed him to wander where he would, since he could find his way to the cottage, so long as he made landmarks. It was his mind, after all. Harry let his mind wander as he walked among the shady trees. So Bleys thought that modern wizards were lazy, and deserved what was happening as some sort of external control? It made sense, in a way. A very convoluted way. From what Bleys had said, it sounded like Voldemort was nothing more than a disease to the wizarding world. Could that be true? And if so, what did that make Harry? Cough medicine? Harry smirked as Alden came back and dropped the stick at his feet. Harry tossed it again and continued walking.

If what Bleys said was true, did that mean that evil would continue to come back, no matter how many times it was destroyed? Harry knew that he didn't want anyone else going through the kind of life he had experienced. It was too hard. It wasn't fair. Why should one person be the answer to such a large problem? Was that like it everywhere, where one person was responsible for the fate of millions, or did it just mean that he was part of that control of which Bleys had spoken? What was the difference between the solution of one problem and the start of a next? Would Harry destroy Voldemort, only to watch another rise in Voldemort's place? He didn't think that he could continue on if that were to happen. Harry racked his brain to find a permanent solution to Voldemort. He couldn't come up with an answer.

He looked up and noticed that it was rather dark in the trees now. Was it sunset already? It looked like it. He turned and started back the way he had come. He could make it back home like Bleys wanted without calling on his magic. He was sure of it. He looked around. Alden was not in sight.

“Alden! Here boy!” Harry listened for Alden's bark. Alden never left his side for long in the woods. In fact, that dog never really left his side, period. The crazy canine had even taken to sleeping at the foot

of his bed, actually on top of Harry's feet. The first night the dog had done so caused Harry his first nightmare of Sirius in well over two months. He became a comforting presence the second night. No bark answered Harry's call. That was not good. Bleys would kill him if he lost his dog. Or, he thought he would be killed. The temperature dropped as more light disappeared. The birdsong that had been a forgotten background noise was conspicuous for not being there. The animals had all run away, but from what?

"Harry Potter. So this is where you have been hiding." Harry froze at the voice. He couldn't be found here. This was his mind. He refused to entertain anyone here he did not like. "I must say that you have created a nice little forest here." Voldemort stepped out from behind one of the trees and approached Harry with an air of satisfaction he usually reserved for his Death Eaters. The man looked the same, but taller. That, Harry considered, was to be expected. He still looked like he was half-snake and half-human (a truly disgusting combination in Harry's opinion) and was giving the oddest evil smile. "You shrank." Harry fought back a smart remark at Voldemort's statement of the obvious. Voldemort patted Harry's head as though he found Harry adorable. If he was able to consider something adorable. Harry fought not to shudder at the touch. He hated Voldemort touching him in anyway. At least the pain had stopped. Harry figured that repeated exposure to Voldemort's touch had inured him to the effects. "Why didn't I think of shrinking you? I'm sure you would have been much easier to handle during lessons." Voldemort said as he turned in a slow circle. Harry did not move. Voldemort considered any movement while he was not looking a form of treachery and would respond violently. The results of the paranoia were not pleasant. "So, this is what your subconscious looks like. Interesting."

Harry's subconscious? It didn't look like this at all. Harry would never design something in his own mind where he could get lost, much less so...relaxed. Frivolity got you killed in his life. He had no time for it. That and he did not like feeling lost. Harry kept his room clear, just in case. He also appeared as a sixteen year old. He would never think of looking like he was ten. That was such a vulnerable age. He liked sixteen much better. In fact, he thought he looked older than sixteen in his subconscious. What did that mean?

“Well, since we’re both here, let’s have a lesson.” Voldemort said as he nudged Harry forward into a clearing. Something wasn’t right. Something...but Harry couldn’t figure out what was wrong. “Do you remember the last curse I taught you?” Harry nodded. “Wand out.” Voldemort ordered. Harry patted down his robe. Where was his wand?

Harry thought back to the last time he had seen it. It had been the mask. He had last seen his wand when he tried to remove the mask from his face. What had happened to it? It had just disappeared; it had rolled away under the mirrors. Harry hadn’t seen it since. He had forgotten, to be totally honest with himself. He had once considered it vital to his continued existence and experience had taught him that to be without his wand was to toy with his own life. This new fact surprised him. He did not need his wand. It was more than that. He did not want his wand. “Well, boy, where is it?” Voldemort snapped.

“I lost it.” Harry answered. “I don’t really need it in here.” Harry said. Voldemort scowled and raised his wand.

“Crucio!” The spell hit Harry and threw him back into a tree. It felt like his nerve endings dislocated from the rest of his nervous system and then started marching in beat with Harry’s heartbeat. Harry arched his back and fought to keep from vocalizing the pain he felt. He would not let Voldemort win. The spell should be coming off any second. Voldemort never held it for long. He wouldn’t hold it for long. Fight it, Harry. Harry wondered where the voice came from. Push it out! Easier said than done. Get rid of the pain. Nice sentiment. Now, how could he do it? This was an Unforgivable Spell and could not be blocked by another spell.

Voldemort was not letting up on the spell. He was not relaxing at all. If anything, it started to feel stronger. Harry felt blood well in his mouth. He had bit through his lip. There was nothing to hold back his screams now. Push it out! Forget your limitations! Harry opened his eyes to see something strange covering him. What was it? Push it off! Well, that made a bit more sense than what he had been told earlier. Harry groaned and allowed his magic to gather in his fingertips and behind his eyes. His glasses had fallen off sometime in the past. He

opened his eyes again (when had closed them?) and asked for the magic to push away the other magic. He felt it gather for a second before leaving him to attack. He was surprised to find that it worked. He felt the spell end. He gasped in breaths of air. It was painful to breathe, but it was also painful not to breathe. His eyes fell closed as the dark trees melted away into a warm clearing. Bleys stood there with Alden at his side. The last thing Harry saw before passing out was a large smile on Bleys' face.

Petunia sat, sipping at the tea her husband had found for her. She didn't taste it, but it gave her something else to do besides talk to Harry. The Potions professor had settled into a chair on the other side of the boy, his...son...beside him. Well, Petunia thought the boy was his son, at any rate. The two of them acted like it. Remus Lupin still snoozed across from Harry, while Vernon amused himself with a book he found in the wing somewhere. Paul sat next to Petunia with a grim look on his face. Sensei mimicked him next to the Potions master, the man he called "Hadrian."

"I wish he would wake up." Paul told Petunia. Snape raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment. "He told me he ends in the hospital wing a lot. How do you stand it?" Paul asked of Petunia.

"I never know about it until after he's out. The headmaster doesn't bother to tell me that he's been hurt. He always says things like 'Harry was in hospital, but is fine now' in his notes to me." She told Paul. "Even if I wouldn't have gone, I would have known. That man plays it up as a great achievement. I wonder how many times Harry has done something that could have seriously hurt him." She put down her cup and sighed. "I still want to know. I want him to wake up." She said as she took Harry's hand again.

"Potter will wake up when he is ready." Snape snapped as he turned to Draco to whisper some direction in the boy's ear. Draco ignored him. "Are you disobeying a direct order about your safety?" Snape asked dangerously.

“Yes, sir.” Draco answered. Snape glared the best he could. Draco only grinned. “That stopped working on me when I was eight.” He confided.

“Can’t blame me for trying.” Snape said as he turned back to Potter. Petunia had reverted back to holding Potter’s hand. How...sweet. Snape wanted to gag. Potter would probably eat this up if he were conscious. The entire room jumped as the boy suddenly arched off the bed. Snape recognized the signs immediately. “Crucio.” He whispered to Draco. Snape leapt off the chair and took hold of one of Harry’s wrist. “Hold him down!” He snapped at Paul on the other side. “Dursley! Get over here!” He ordered. Vernon came up. “Take one of his legs and do not let go.” Paul took one of Harry’s legs while Petunia held down his other hand.

“What is wrong with him?” Petunia gasped out.

“It’s an intense pain curse, called the Cruciatus. It’s an Unforgivable Spell and the worst pain imaginable.” Snape told her. “Most of the injuries come from flailing around.” He and the others held Harry down while he counted. The curse should end soon or Potter would have no brain left. The boy continued to convulse, even after the normal time for the Dark Lord. Blood leaked out of one side of his mouth as he started to scream. Snape threw up a Silencing spell and prayed it would hold. He had convinced the other doctor to go to bed. He didn’t want the man awake. Too many awkward questions. Good Merlin. Potter is lucky to be whole. This curse needs to end! Harry continued to flail until something, Snape wasn’t sure what, jerked through his body. Harry fell limp on the bed, blood leaking from one side of his mouth and sweat beading on his forehead.. If it was possible for someone to look even more unconscious than before, Potter carried it off well. Everyone relaxed their hold. Vernon moved away to his spot while the rest of them stared down at Harry.

“Is he okay?” Petunia asked as she released the arm she had been holding. Snape actually felt something prick his heart. Sympathy? It couldn’t be. Snape did not do sympathy. Sympathy got you killed.

“It is too early to tell. We will not know for certain until he decides to deign us with his presence.” Snape told her. He looked at Draco’s pale face. “Lie down.” He said as he nudged Draco to the nearest bed. “You need some sleep.” Draco didn’t argue. He thought that the image of Potter writhing on the bed would stay with him forever. Snape acted like Potter had been through something like this before. A discreet glance at his face told him that his guess was true. Snape reached into his robe and pulled out a vial. “Drink this. It will help you sleep.” Draco downed the Dreamless Sleep with a grateful nod. He didn’t want to dream about it.

Snape prepared the smelling salts as usual and placed the cloth on Harry’s chest. “What is that?” Petunia asked as she watched him.

“Something I had to devise for him when he started having visions from the Dark Lord.” Snape answered shortly. He started the usual chest massage, but it only seemed to give Potter more discomfort. He straightened the cloth and watched the boy breathe. At least nothing was wrong there. The boy was still breathing. Hopefully, Potter would still be able to think.

“Visions?” Petunia asked. How much had Harry and the headmaster been keeping from her? More importantly, how could she have left Harry to go through it all alone? Old aches rose in her chest, but she forced them back down with a vengeance.

“Potter’s scar connects him to the Dark Lord.” Snape explained. “The Dark Lord discovered this and sends images to Potter. The boy used to trust what he saw. Now, he does not.” Snape stood and stared down at the boy. “I tried to teach him a skill to stop the visions last year, but we do not get along well. He did not learn. He has it now, so it had to be a particularly powerful vision for Potter to even feel the curse, much less react as he did.” He explained. Petunia stared down at her nephew as though seeing him for the first time.

“How long has this been going on?” She asked in a quiet and firm voice.

“Almost all of his fifth year.” Snape answered. Petunia Dursley, it appeared, was not a Muggle to challenge. In fact, if Voldemort himself were here, Snape would put his money on the Muggle. She was livid. Petunia turned an about face and marched over to her husband.

“You will never say another cross word to that boy.” She ordered. Vernon Dursley looked up from his book in surprise. “Ever.” Vernon knew that he was just smart enough to carry on a business, fix a doorknob, compliment his wife’s cooking and looks as needed. He also knew that his wife could make him perfectly miserable if she so chose. It looked like she was close to carrying out just such an action. He nodded nervously and returned to his book. He figured that all raising techniques were now off. Well, he could treat the boy like a houseguest. That wouldn’t be too difficult. A few vague questions at dinner and then leave him to his own devices.

Petunia went back over to the bed and faced Snape. “I want to know everything the headmaster has not told me, everything that has happened and who Harry has talked to. I also want to know about other ma-, er, magical schools to finish Harry’s education.” Snape’s eyebrows rose as he took in her determined air. She was completely serious. Goodness. This was a change of events.

“This may take some time.” He warned her. A quick glance around told him that everyone who was awake was ready to hear a few things about Potter. The boy already hated him. It could be no worse now if he broke a bit of the boy’s confidence. In fact, he was under no obligation to keep any secrets. He would treat this as a parent/teacher meeting. If the boy had any complaints, Snape would ignore them, as he usually did. “Potter has had quite a few adventures since coming to school. Most of them have endangered his life at least once and the lives of others.”

Warmth seeped into him. It covered him, clear up to his neck. He tried to roll over, but found that his limbs wouldn’t cooperate with his intentions. He forced his eyes to open. Everything was blurry. A familiar figure was near him, pouring something into the tub. Harry moved his eyes from the man he couldn’t quite make out to the water. Why was he in a tub? Wait a moment. There was something in the

water, something floating in it. Leaves? Another bundle was added to the water. It was then that Harry realized he hurt. It hurt like he was regrowing all of his bones and internal organs at once, over and over. Harry heard someone moan and the man looked at him. Who was that? The man waved a hand in front of Harry's face and pleasant feeling surrounded his mind. He was warm, safe, and feeling remarkably comfortable. His eyes closed again to the sound of another bucket of water being poured over him.

He woke to the sound of a fire. Someone was touching him. "Relax" A warm voice said as the hand flattened to keep Harry in place and not moving. It sounded like he was smiling. "You're not well yet." Harry opened his eyes as the hand started massaging his chest.

"Bleys?" Harry whispered. Ugh. It felt like razorblades down his throat. He grimaced and felt little pinpricks across his face. Bleys moved from Harry's side and disappeared for a few seconds. He came back with a small bowl.

"Open your mouth." Bleys placed a finger on Harry's chin slightly and pushed down. Harry fought against another grimace and did as Bleys asked. His teacher tipped something warm and thick with the consistency of honey down his throat. "Don't swallow. Let it do the work." Bleys brought out another wooden bowl and dipped something out of it. He massaged the stuff into Harry's chest. "Just relax." Harry felt the liquid in his mouth start to slide down his throat, choking him the slightest bit before it moved on. He sighed in relief as the stuff left a trail of numb behind as he felt it reach his stomach. Snape could take some lessons on making potions taste good. That had been sweet, almost like vanilla in flavor. Bleys stood and moved towards Harry's forehead. "Close your eyes." Harry obediently shut his eyes and Bleys' hands started rubbing something into Harry's face.

"What are you doing?" Harry whispered.

"Giving you a massage. Your muscles need some help. You pulled quite a few of them and injured yourself." Bleys told him as Harry felt the fingers travel over his face. "You are probably sore head to toe."

Harry realized that Bleys was right. He was sore, well, almost everywhere. It felt like he had went several rounds with...wait a moment. Harry opened his eyes and jerked his head up to look at him.

"Where are my clothes?" Harry asked as Bleys forced Harry's head back on the table. Harry was covered with a towel in the vital area, but that was it.

"How did you think I was going to do this?" Bleys asked. Harry just stared up at him. "It's nothing I haven't seen before." Harry cringed and felt a blush creep up on him. "Is everyone this modest where you are from?" Bleys asked with a teasing smile.

"Mostly." Harry answered as Bleys rolled Harry over to start on his back. Bleys slid a pillow under Harry's head and ordered the boy to stay still. "Everyone I know." The last word turned into a groan as a kink Harry didn't know he had had was smoothed out. "Oh, that feels wonderful." He told Bleys, embarrassment momentarily forgotten as he felt some ease for the pain he was in. What had happened to cause some much-

"So I gathered." Bleys said. "Your people strike me as very strange, child." Bleys moved lower on Harry's back, ending Harry's attempts to think about the cause of his pain.

"Well." Harry stopped to bite his lip as Bleys worked out a tense spot. "I find it strange – ow! – to have a man I consider a teacher giving me a massage." Bleys chuckled and massaged more ointment into Harry's muscles. "I think that muscle is fine." He said with a pink tinge in his cheeks. All this touching was strange. Harry was still getting used to the affection Hermione and Mrs. Weasley gave him while with the Weasley family or at school. He had noticed Mr. Weasley stop himself in a motion once or twice that looked suspiciously like a hug (he had seen Ron and his father give a few quick ones). Even Sirius had enjoyed hugging him. It was definitely not something he was used to from his old life, but even Aunt Petunia was starting to hug. Was all this physical affection, hugging and slaps on the back, normal, or was Harry the strange one?

“You let me judge, alright? I don’t want to miss something that could cause a serious injury later.” Bleys said as he moved down to Harry’s legs. Harry decided he would never tell anyone about this. The press would have a field day. Harry’s eyes closed as Bleys smoothed out several muscles.

“What.” Harry’s face split in a wide yawn. “happened?” Bleys chuckled as Harry fought to stay awake.

“You falling asleep?” Bleys had progressed to Harry’s feet. Harry decided that every person on earth deserved a foot massage. It was wonderful.

“Maybe.” Harry answered as he felt his body relaxing. He had asked a question of Bleys, but couldn’t remember it. It couldn’t have been terribly important, could it?

“Go ahead. That painkiller I gave you should have put you to sleep some minutes ago.” Bleys wiped his hands with a towel and looked down at Harry. Harry’s eyes shut and stayed that way, though Harry was not asleep. Bleys wrapped the blankets around Harry and lifted him from the table. Harry felt the tingle of magic and knew that Bleys was using a charm to enable a smooth transition.

“Cheater.” Harry said as he leaned into Bleys, taking in the warmth of the blanket, the strong arms around him and the hint of cooking herbs on the man’s clothes. It was very comforting. The strange sense of having a father swept over Harry again. Bleys lowered Harry into his bed and arranged the bedclothes around Harry, as though trying to make sure Harry would not move from the bed, or fall as he had managed to do the first day.

“Sleep well, child. You deserve it.” Harry smiled as the man fussed with a blanket and started to drift off to the sound of Bleys singing something in a foreign language under his breath. Harry would worry about that answer he was looking for when he woke up. He felt Alden jump onto the bed and circle three times before settling on his feet. This last comfort was in place and Harry forgot the world around him. He was going to get some serious sleep time.

Author's Note: No cliffies! Look! No cliffies! Woot! Now no one will hunt me down. I can study in peace. I hope. Let me know what you thought.

Author's Note: I made it! I survived another exam week! (Collapses on floor in heap) Well, you all aren't interested in listening to me, but there are a few concerns some of you anonymous reviewers had.

Is this slash? – NO. There was nothing sexual at all in what Bleys was doing. Harry was hurt. Bleys was treating the hurt. THAT'S ALL!

Harry returning to Hogwarts: I keep forgetting you all can't see my notes. It's close, people. Some of you may kill me, but it's close.

Typos and Grammar: I blame Microsoft Word's AutoCorrect! Anyone know how to turn it off?

To the twins: Thanks! I'm glad you like it. I'm a twin too.

To the editor: Thanks for the info. I've been trying to improve and I have checked this over several times, but I will admit that I may have missed something. "Apparent flaws or mistakes" – Oh, very good. Some people catch them and others do not. I'm glad you are a part of the former. That will make my job more interesting. Please feel free to nit pick any grammar errors or Americanisms. I tend to use those. I am American. Thanks again!

Thanks to all my reviewers! I love you all and you kept me going when I was studying!

Harry came awake slowly and sighed in contentment. He was warm, relaxed, and completely comfortable. He never wanted to move again. He pulled his blankets up a bit and rolled over, prepared to have a nice lie in and ignore the rest of the world for a while. Bleys could do without him for a while, right? Right. Bleys was a grown man and able to take care of himself. Harry rolled over again and snuggled into a comfortable position. He froze when he noticed something odd. He had no pajamas. His sluggish brain caught up with him and reminded him of a few things. Right. Massage. That thought made him pause. What had happened? Why would he have needed a massage? Bleys had mentioned something about him hurting himself, pulling muscles. When had he managed it?

Harry felt a bit of pain gather behind his eyes as images slipped through. He closed his eyes against the pain and was able to see the

images more clearly than before, and those images disturbed him. Voldemort. Voldemort had been inside his head! That made no sense. Voldemort was not able to get into his head here. He was sure of it. He sat up, disturbing Alden in the process, who only whined the slightest bit before falling back to sleep. He looked around and found that it was night. Bleys had banked the fire and pulled the cauldron off the hob. A strange smell was in the air near Harry. What was that? He kicked the blankets off him and got out of bed. A small metal container sat on the nightstand next to his bed. Incense? Harry had never really seen incense used, unless he counted the incense in Trelawny's tower, but the smoke appeared similar. It smelled a little sweet, but also a little spicy. A strong whiff of it made Harry a little dizzy. He moved away from it and pulled out clothing from the little trunk at the foot of his bed.

He dressed and went into the bathroom. He splashed cool water on his face and avoided the sleeping mirror. He didn't want it screaming at him to do something with his hair. He understood. His hair was doomed without heavy styling products. He didn't need reminded of it everyday! He was halfway across the room to his books before another little stab of pain caused him to drop to his knees. He blinked away spots before his eyes as another image appeared in his mind. Harry shook his head to clear it, but the image continued. Voldemort lowering his wand, fading away, to be replaced by a smiling Bleys. What? Harry fought to stay upright as the image continued to show Bleys approach Harry (the odd angle told Harry he was lying on the ground) and stoop to pick him up. "You've done very well, lightening child. Very well." The image ended as the darkness had closed around Harry's eyes.

Harry came back to himself, still on his knees with tears leaking out of the corner of his eyes. He couldn't tell if they were tears of remembered pain or of his present mental pain. He heard the words of Bellatrix Lestrange the one time he had attempted an Unforgivable. Bleys had not only meant to cast the curse...he had wanted Harry to feel the pain. Harry pushed himself to his feet and stumbled out of the cottage. He had to get away. He needed to be away. He slipped on the paving stones as he continued to the forest. He could hide there. Bleys couldn't find him there. Harry held his hands up to protect his face as he dove into the underbrush that had somehow grown over

night. He pushed through until he found himself in a clearing far enough away from the cottage to think clearly.

Bleys had been Voldemort. He had cast the Unforgivable and he had wanted Harry to feel the pain. Why had that happened? Why had he wanted to hurt Harry like that? He had actually wanted Harry to feel the pain. Why? Harry sank to the ground and pulled his knees up to his chest. He wanted Paul. He buried his face on his knees and sighed as his mind whirled with what he had learned. He wanted Paul and his aunt. She would screech at Bleys and then take him home. He could hide in his room and forget that the rest of the world existed. That's all he wanted to do at the moment. Forget everything. He had no idea how long he had sat there, just trying to forget. He jumped when Alden burst through the bushes and attacked him with dog kisses.

"Alden! Get off!" Harry pushed at the dog and squirmed out from under the animal. "Mental dog!" Harry snapped as he stood up and turned to face the dog. "Think you're clever, do you?" Harry asked him. Alden only paused and wagged his tail. Harry rolled his eyes. "Stupid mutt."

Hands grabbed him from behind. "Harry!" Bleys said as he turned the boy in his arms. "Why did you run off?" He questioned as he looked Harry over. The boy had been crying, but why? He only had a few seconds to look over the child before Harry reacted. Harry pushed against him and backed up as far as the little clearing would let him. "Harry, what's wrong?" Bleys asked.

"It was you!" Harry bit out. Bleys closed his eyes briefly before facing Harry again. "You did it." Bleys stopped and thought before approaching his rather livid student. The boy had slept nearly a week and was now approaching the age of thirteen. He could no longer pick him up if he wanted. The child's emotions were becoming more complex as his mind and body came closer to being identical. He missed the days of a six year old Harry Potter. He would have gathered the boy in his arms and let him cry out his fears before explaining his actions. And the child would have accepted his reasoning and left it alone. Now, it would not be so easy.

“I thought I told you to stop suppressing your emotions.” Bleys said as he sat down on a log. He motioned for Harry to join him, but was not surprised to find that the boy refused. “Yes, I cast that curse on you.” He told Harry. Harry stood his ground, but Bleys could see the anger well up in his eyes. “You needed to learn how to throw it off.”

“You couldn’t think of any other way?” Harry snapped as he backed away from Bleys. “Didn’t you think that I would have accepted that as a lesson?” Bleys stopped and considered Harry for a moment. It was true. Harry would have accepted that as a lesson, perhaps even requested it if he knew that such an ability existed.

Bleys sighed as he thought back to Harry’s performance. The boy had broken through his own thoughts. He was able to throw off both the Cruciatus and Imperius Curses. The Killing Curse, well, he could already do that. He just didn’t know it yet. “Voldemort would not pause and give you time to prepare yourself. I could not afford to do so if you were to learn this skill.” Bleys reasoned with Harry.

Harry made a motion that looked like he wanted to physically attack Bleys before turning away from him and taking a deep breath. “I want to go home.” Harry whispered, unable to make his voice louder.

Bleys shook his head. “I’m afraid that you are not quite ready yet.” Bleys stood and went over to the boy. He placed his hands on the lad’s shoulders to turn him back towards the cottage. He was surprised when Harry leapt away from him and backed up against a tree. He took one look at the boy and realized that he would not be able to teach anything until the boy could trust him again. “I thought you would understand why I did as I did.” Bleys said sadly. Perhaps he had mistaken some traits of Harry’s personality.

Harry moved away from him and kicked at the log. “For my own good, right?” Harry sneered at him. This situation had escalated far beyond Bleys’ reach. He had intended on being next to the boy’s bed when he woke up. He should have slept until late this morning. Bleys had left some sleeping aide burning next to the boy’s bed for that reason.

“Should I start calling you Dumbledore?” That was a grave insult, coming from Harry.

Bleys looked Harry over and sighed. He had to try again. “It is better for you to have the instinct of how to fight this magic, rather than have a set of steps.” Bleys told him.

Harry only shook his head and sighed. “I want to go home.” He demanded again.

“Your magic is not ready yet.” Bleys denied the request. “Let’s go back home and we’ll talk about this.” Bleys said. He turned to go when he was stopped by one word from Harry.

“No.” The boy stood as he had left him, but something had changed in him. “I want to go home. You can either send me, or I will figure out a way to do it myself. There are no limitations, remember?” Harry questioned him.

Bleys stepped towards Harry again, a plea on his face. “Harry, please. Just listen to me.” Bleys said. “You are a danger to yourself and others as long as your wandless magic remains untrained.”

“No.” Harry closed his eyes and refused even to look at Bleys. The man could feel the boy trying frantically to figure out a way home. If he knew how simple it was, Bleys would never see him again. Harry seemed prepared to carry out any threat he made.

“You are not ready.” Bleys told him. Perhaps the boy would listen to reason. They both knew he wasn’t ready.

“That has never stopped me before.” Harry answered. Well, that was true. Harry had never really been prepared for his many adventures. He wondered how much luck had played in Harry’s survival and if Fate was toying with the boy. “Send me home or I’ll figure out a way to do it myself.” Harry held his emotions in check and faced Bleys with all of the calm he managed to have in front of Voldemort.

“I thought I told you to quit suppressing your emotions.” Bleys advanced on Harry. Old instincts came up and Harry backed away from him. Bleys stopped in shock. The boy was afraid of him. This was not a part of his plan. He did not want Harry to be frightened of him. The boy couldn’t learn anything this way. Not this one. Not now. Bleys looked at Harry and noticed tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Harry hid his fear well, but Bleys could tell in his stance and his magic. It kept spiking as Harry fought his fear. “Very well.” Bleys told him. “I’ll send you home.” Bleys got down on one knee and put his hands where Harry could see them. Harry was taller this way. “I will be available, should you need me.” He told the boy. “You won’t be alone.” He said. Harry had relaxed the slightest bit. “Come here.” Harry fought with himself for a good thirty seconds. Bleys let him do so. Harry needed to trust Bleys enough for this to work.

Harry stepped up in front of Bleys and faced him as though to say, “now what?” Bleys moved faster than Harry could react. He reached out, grabbed Harry, and placed a hand on Harry’s forehead. “Take care, child.” He whispered. Harry fought against his hands, but nothing shielded his mind. Bleys sent a little thought and Harry’s eyes closed and his body relaxed. He disappeared as he fell asleep. Alden came up alongside of Bleys and whined. “You are not getting out of it, either.” He told the dog.

Harry opened his eyes in a white room. His first instinct told him that he was at Hogwarts and he nearly panicked. A slight beeping broke through his thoughts and told him that he was in the Muggle world. He sat up and looked around. He was at St. Jude’s. He relaxed and disconnected himself from the machines. He mumbled about Muggles and their machines while he pondered the IV needle in his arm. What in the world was going on and why was he here? He undid the tape and slid the needle out of his arm. A nearby cotton ball and pressure from folding his arm at the elbow stopped the bleeding. He waved his hand and a uniform, complete with shoes, appeared on the bed next to him. He hopped down from the bed and waited for his feet to catch up with his brain. He needed a shower.

The doors to the infirmary burst open immediately after Harry had shut the bathroom door behind him and had started the shower. “Where is he?” Petunia demanded as Snape and the doctor swept up to the bed.

Remus demanded. "What happened?" He brought up the rear with Draco. The two had been working on Draco's Astronomy assignment while Snape had calmed Petunia Dursley. The stories about her nephew had upset her, but she was holding up well. Her husband had not been able to stay. Vernon had left for work and told Petunia that he would call her to check in with her to see how she was doing. Remus doubted he had cared about Harry's past at all.

Snape looked at the bed and turned back around to face the group. "He's gone." Snape said succinctly.

The other doctor made a derisive noise in his throat. "That doesn't make sense." Dr. Lansky said as he looked over the machines. "He was practically in a coma. People just don't get up and walk away from something like that." A snort caused him to stop and look at the other doctor. Professor Snake, or something like that.

"You don't know your patient very well. Anything is possible with this boy." Snape told him.

Dr. Lansky coiled up the IV tube. "He shouldn't be able to just get up and walk. Some stumbling would be involved at the very least. We would have heard him."

Snape rolled his eyes and waved his wand to calm the doctor. "Go inform the nurses, security, his therapist. Whatever it is you normally do. We'll look here and spread out. He can't have got far." Dr. Lansky rushed away to do as Snape asked. Snape turned to the rest of the group. "Potter, or whoever took Potter, can not have gone very far."

Petunia stood next to the bed. "You all can defend yourselves against a wizard. I can not. I'll stay here in case Harry is hiding somewhere in this room." She ushered everyone to the door and turned back to the room. She started looking under all of the beds and in the closets, just in case. Harry always seemed to hide in very small things. That was how his cupboard came about. He had refused to sleep in his room as a toddler and instead preferred the cupboard under the stairs. She had tried to talk him back into his room for over six months until Vernon said he would out grow the phase if left alone long enough.

Now, Petunia realized that something had to have happened between Harry and Vernon that reinforced what had been a child's fancy. She had yet to find out what had happened, but she had threatened Vernon enough in the past twenty-four hours to ensure that something like that could never happen again.

A door opening caused her to turn around. Harry came out of the bathroom, completely dressed and drying his hair with a towel. "Harry James Potter!" Petunia said as she advanced on her nephew. How dare the boy cause them all this worry! "Do you have any idea how worried we've all been?" She demanded. Harry stopped in shock and let the towel fall to his shoulders as his aunt hurried over to him. What was she talking about? "We come back and find you gone, heaven only knows where, and you don't let us know where you are." Oh, so that was it. She hustled him back towards the bed in which he had been and nudged him to a sitting position. "You were only in a magical coma for the last seven hours. Do not move from this bed!" She ordered.

Harry watched as his aunt marched away from him and into the hallway. Harry was not going to disobey. She had scared him. She sounded like Molly Weasley. Harry recognized the tone. It was the "how dare you scare me, but I'm so glad you're alright" tone and Harry had heard it from Mrs. Weasley more than once. It had been directed at Ron, mostly, and Ginny, but he had been on the receiving end once or twice. He had never thought that he would hear his aunt using the tone with him. He recalled what she had said and his eyes widened. She had said "magic". She returned with several people in tow. Paul was leading the way, followed by Remus, Snape, and Draco Malfoy, of all people. What in the world had been happening while he was asleep?

"Hold still, Potter." Snape ordered as he pulled out his wand. Harry tensed, but did not move. This was Snape. The man had not revealed his secret to Dumbledore yet, and was to be trusted. That didn't mean that Harry had to trust him too far. Snape appeared to be satisfied with what he saw and ended the spell. "He is in perfect health, miraculously." Snape commented with his usual dry wit. Well, what did they expect?

“Could someone please tell me what is going on?” Harry asked, just slightly perplexed.

“What do you remember?” Snape asked. Harry considered the question. Did Snape know about Bleys, or was he asking about before Bleys?

“I was having a nightmare.” Harry answered. Something twitched in Snape’s face, but he said nothing. “It was rather, ah, intense. That’s all.” Harry shrugged.

“Dear Merlin help us.” Snape said to himself as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “The boy is possessed and he doesn’t remember a thing.”

“Possessed?” Harry asked. Okay, so he knew that he had been with Bleys for what could be several hours, but he had not been possessed, had he?

“It’s okay, Harry.” Paul said as he moved forward. “You’re alright, and that’s all that matters now.” Good old Paul.

Harry nodded and thanked Paul, trying to order his thoughts enough to lock them away. The entire group was surprised by Dr. Lansky returning. “Ah, here he is.” Harry had actually forgotten about the doctor. “You look just fine to me. What’s the last thing you remember, Evan?” The doctor had the slightly glazed look Harry remembered from the Muggles at the World Cup. Too many Memory Charms here. Harry twitched a finger and smiled as a little more coherency came into the man’s eyes.

“I’m feeling fine, Dr. Lansky. I just remember the nightmare I was having. It was intense.” Snape moved into the background and snorted as he heard Harry’s explanation. “When can I leave?” Harry asked.

“Not for twenty-four hours. I want to keep an eye on you, just in case.” Dr. Lansky said as he consulted Harry’s file. Simple

observations filled the space about Harry's condition. "I suppose you're hungry?" He asked Harry.

"Have you ever known me not to be?" Harry asked.

"Several times, Evan. Several times. Mostly when your nerves are bad." Dr. Lansky said as he moved towards his office. "I'll call and have something sent up. In the meantime, I want all visitors not related to my patient to clear out. You can stay, if you want, Paul."

Snape approached the bed and stared down his nose at Harry. "I have no idea what you did, Potter." Snape told him once the doctor was safely in his office. "I will find out." He promised his student.

"I have no doubt of that, sir." Harry agreed. "Thank you for all of your help." Harry said and inclined his head in a sort of bow. Snape's gaze narrowed, but he only returned the nod and swept out of the room.

"Are you ever going to have a normal year?" Draco asked as he stepped closer to Harry.

"Ah, the bouncing ferret has joined the Light side. That's good. We don't torture our followers." Harry said with a smile.

"Your head is still too big to fit in the room." Draco returned with equal animosity. Both boys regarded each other for a moment before bursting into laughter. There was an unacknowledged truce in that moment. Harry decided that he and Hermione had to introduce Draco to Star Wars sometime soon.

"Glad to have you aboard, mate." Harry told him as he patted Draco's shoulder. "You touch Hermione and you'll have to answer to me." He warned. Draco only stared at him. Harry couldn't keep his composure and chuckled. "Actually, it's her you're going to have to worry about. She has a wicked right hook."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it." He started to turn when Harry caught him. Harry tilted Draco's face to the light.

“Why didn’t you tell Snape that it still hurts?” Harry asked as he ran a finger over Draco’s scar down the right side of his face. Draco pulled away from the touch and raised a hand to the scar with his eyes wide in shock.

“Draco!” Snape snapped from the doorway. “We are leaving!” Draco gave Harry a questioning look. Harry only shrugged. “Now!” Draco scurried after Snape and disappeared through the door. “You lot go back to where you belong! He’s awake and will be back with you tomorrow!” Harry heard Snape say to someone out in the hall. He thought he heard Sparky say something to Snape, but was not sure.

Remus laughed to himself as he came up to Harry. “Harry?” Remus looked Harry over and mussed his hair. “What happened?”

Harry turned and smiled at Remus. “Beats me.” Harry answered. “One minute, nightmare. The next, I’m waking up here and dying for a shower.” He shrugged again, as though to demonstrate his own confusion.

“Are you alright?” Remus asked.

Harry looked himself over. “All ten toes. All ten fingers. Eyes are still here. Nose.” Harry stopped and looked behind him. “Yep, I’m all here.” He told Remus. “I’m fine.”

“Good to know. You’ll let someone know...”

“If I start to feel bad, yes, I promise.” Harry answered. “I swear.” He said, looking into Remus’s eyes. “How close is the full moon?” Harry asked.

“Not too close. What do you need, Harry?” Harry stopped and looked at his aunt.

“We need a car. I can’t have you taking taxis all the time, and I’ll need transportation eventually, especially once I am licensed.” Harry explained.

“We’ll talk about that once you come home.” Petunia said. “You don’t need to worry about a car just yet.” She told him patiently.

Harry made a face and sighed. “Remus still needs one.” Harry patiently explained, as though it were obvious. Okay, so he sounded like he was pouting. He was tired!

“Yes, and you need to be resting.” Darn, how did she know? Oh, that’s right. She had raised him. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Lupin.” Petunia said with a smile for the werewolf.

“My pleasure. I’ll stop by later in the week, Harry. No more scary stuff, okay?” He asked Harry.

“It’s not my fault.” Harry grumbled good naturedly as Remus patted him on the shoulder and moved away from him and out the door. Paul followed him to the door and told Harry he would check in on him later, as Harry had given him some extra paperwork. Harry only shrugged at the man and Paul left the room.

Harry turned to regard his aunt. Her expression was just a little intimidating. “I heard you.” Harry told her. Petunia stopped arranging the blankets and looked at him. “When you were talking to me, while I was asleep.” Harry explained further. “I do want to try.” He said. “To be family.” Harry glanced at her as though to judge her thoughts. He was shocked to find that she was crying.

Petunia pulled him into her arms and hugged him tight. “I’m glad.” She whispered. Harry’s own arms wrapped around her and he closed his eyes. This felt good. The two of them stayed like that until a nurse came in, bearing a tray Harry was more than willing to eat. Snape had reached the door with Draco only to be stopped by an old friend. “Hadrian? Follow me, please.” Snape motioned to Draco with his head and followed the man down the hallways to what could only be his office. Sensei gestured them to seats and started pouring out some tea into cups.

Draco looked at the cups and noticed that there were no handles at all. That was different. Sensei took one and handed another to Draco. Sensei and Snape toasted each other before drinking. "Hi, Dad." Sensei looked up at the boy with a towel over his face. "I fixed that equipment..." He trailed off after he pulled the towel down and noticed that his father had guests. "Sorry." He started to leave when Sensei stopped him.

"Take Drake with you. He will be bored listening to adults." Sensei said with a twinkle in his eye. Draco turned to Snape in appeal to allow him to stay. Snape smirked and motioned for Draco to follow Rick. It felt good to treat him like the child he should be.

"Go have fun. I'll collect you when it's time to leave." Draco glared at him, but got up and left the room. "I don't know what I'm going to do with him." Snape said with a sigh.

"He's very quick to grow up." Snape looked at Sensei and nodded.

"He's had to." Snape explained. "His previous family demanded a lot of him." Snape explained.

Sensei smirked. "Like yours demanded of you." Snape looked up at Sensei, startled and wondering if Potter had somehow communicated anything to Sensei.

"I don't know what you mean, Leonard." Snape said in an offhand tone.

"Deshi is different like you are different." He explained. "He has this power you always had. He also has something else, just like you have." Sensei motioned to Snape's left arm. Snape shifted his jacket to cover his arm. "You and he are wizards?" Snape gave Leonard a look that told him everything, but said nothing. "Ah, I see. I had wondered where you went during the school year."

"You knew I went to school." Snape said in a bored voice. "I never felt the need to elaborate." Snape held out his tea cup for more to

drink and sighed. "We are not allowed to reveal our world to anyone. Even family needs permission to be told."

"I understand." Leonard said with a faint smile. "Deshi said the same, during Diagon." Snape looked up at Leonard with an eyebrow raised.

"He told you?" This could be very bad. If Potter had revealed their world to anyone, even a person as trustworthy as Sensei...

"I forced it. I do not like secrets much, especially when it concerns a student." Leonard took some of his own tea and looked out the window. "His life is in danger?" Sensei's comment was not a question.

"Since the day he was born. I should think that he is used to it by now." Snape commented.

"Oh, he is. Forgetful of the value of his own life, because of that." Sensei told him.

"I've noticed that." Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "I thought, at one time, that he had no regard for the lives of others. We've had to save him many times. Now, I realize that he is not worried about his, but others." Snape shook his head. "I'm tired of seeing that boy unconscious."

"What do you have to do with deshi?" Snape folded his arms and considered the man next to him.

"He is your deshi, is he?" Snape said in a distracted voice. Sensei wondered of what the taciturn man was thinking. "That's good."

"Hadrian." Snape closed his eyes and sighed.

"Your deshi is one of my students at school." Snape explained. "You already know his real name and what he is, and by relation, what I am." Snape told Sensei as he moved towards the window and looked out. He moved the curtain back and considered how much to tell the man with whom he had trained.

“Your real name is not Hadrian?” Sensei said as he came up along side him. “Is it, brother?” Snape smirked at the old nickname and shook his head.

“No, merely an alias.” Snape confirmed as he turned to look Sensei in the eye.

“Many faces, many names.” Sensei dismissed it and shrugged. “What have you been doing with yourself?” Sensei gave him a sidelong look and smirked. Snape returned the look and turned to look out at Draco. He and Rick were talking in the gym. The topic eluded Snape, but he figured it was something all teenage boys enjoyed. Sensei’s voice broke him out of his thoughts. “The boys will be fine. Your son and my son together. No school will be left.” Sensei smirked and Snape shared it.

“You don’t know Draco.” Snape told him.

“Mischievous, like his father.” Sensei nudged him in the shoulder. “Sly and cunning with an innocent face to the world.” Snape stopped and glared at Sensei.

“Leonard, you know that you were the cause of many of our ‘mischievous adventures’.” Snape sneered at his comrade.

“Yes. Yes, I was. Our poor sensei. Beside himself most of our student days.” Snape nodded.

“He was mostly concerned with what he was going to do with you.” Snape agreed. “He despaired of you ever really learning.”

“Now, look at me.” Sensei said with mock sadness. “A teacher and a father. The old man would die of shock.” Sensei directed the way with his chin and Snape fell into step with him as easily as when they had both been students. The two left the office and started down the hallway. “So, my brother is a magic one and he protects the children.” Sensei mused. “Interesting choice.”

“I have my vows.” Sensei turned a surprised face towards him before smirking again.

“The same as I, little brother.” Sensei told him. “Come. We will find something to eat and then I will hear all about it.” Snape followed Sensei, fighting the feelings of nostalgia as his old training partner started to speak of his own students and their progress.

Author's Note: Okay, that's all for now, guys. I'm pretty much tapped. I don't know when I'll have another chapter out, maybe next week. No promises. I have Xmas presents to make.

Author's Note: I love school vacations! The family stress, the drama, and the traffic! Happy Holidays and New Year to all of my readers and reviewers!

Harry rolled over in bed and ignored the sounds the doctor made as he shut down the infirmary for the evening. He was not tired and he felt fine. He didn't see what everyone thought was so important in keeping him in the infirmary tonight! Okay, so he had exhibited some pretty different symptoms that still puzzled the Muggle doctor, but even Paul had said that he was fine! No one ever believed Harry when it counted. Harry scoffed a bit and rubbed his face with one hand.

He sat up and abandoned hope of sleep. Harry figured that his body was feeling that it had slept long enough and did not need more of it. Well, Harry agreed! He leaned down over the railing of the hospital bed and pulled out his book bag from the storage area. If his memory served him correctly (and he sincerely hoped it did. He had been away several weeks, after all), he should have some drawing supplies in his bag. Drawing was always good for boredom when he could find nothing else to do.

He sharpened one of the pencils Hermione had given him for his birthday and opened his sketchbook to a new sheet of paper. He relaxed his shoulders and set the pencil to paper, allowing his mind to wander as his hand shifted lines into images. Bleys. He felt odd, knowing that Bleys would not be waking him in the morning, that they would not be having a lesson. Bleys was gone. He hesitated to say that he missed Bleys, but he still felt strange, knowing that Bleys was no longer there. He had told everyone he had not remembered what had happened while he was sleeping, because he did not want questioned endlessly about his time with someone Harry could not produce, and was even less sure about his own feelings about the man.

He felt conflicted. Bleys had been a great mentor to him before The Curse. Harry smirked at himself as he realized he was using capital letters to refer to the event in his own head. Bleys was great before The Curse. He was patient, understanding, and tolerant. He explained things just enough to allow Harry to learn something on his

own, but also left enough room for questions and answers that did not make Harry feel slow around his teacher. The man's way of teaching differed greatly from the teaching at Hogwarts. His professors there explained everything in steps and then helped any students whom were struggling to follow those steps. Bleys had not even bothered with explanations. He just told Harry the end goal and left his student to it, horribly frustrated, yet engaged in the work. When Harry did accomplish the task, he felt an immense satisfaction, more rich than any triumph at Hogwarts could ever inspire. Even Voldemort explained things in steps! Bleys had tapped an innate ability in Harry and had nurtured it with such a subtle hand that Harry was only now aware of it.

There were other things that Harry liked about Bleys, but these feelings were harder to work through than others. Bleys had cared for him, and taken care of him, like no one else in Harry's life. Harry was not exactly sure what a father was like, and he hesitated naming the relationship as father and would say that it was very close to such a was nurturing and caring, but also taught Harry a bit of self-reliance in some things in which he had not had before. Harry knew he was more independent than others his age, which made him think that a little neglect was better than all the coddling in the world, but Bleys again had influenced him in a way no other had managed. He was...calmer? That wasn't the right word. More thoughtful, perhaps? He thought about things now, and looked at everything from different angles before proceeding with his choice. He wasn't sure what word he was searching for. He had the skills and he knew what he was doing. He could not describe it. He turned the page away from Bley's cottage (he had no idea how that had appeared on his paper) and started another drawing.

He had heard everyone come into the infirmary while he was still dressing. He used wandless magic to get his Mini-Messenger and questioned Hermione about everything he needed to know. He was surprised to find that Hermione had known that he was in a "coma" of some kind and he thanked her for her worry. Wandless magic put the book back where it was supposed to be after he had finished talking with Hermione. Hermione's messages told him all he needed to know. Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape had disappeared from the castle with a hasty note stating that Draco had "manor business" that

required his attention. Snape accompanied him as his mentor and advisor and neither had returned. Harry told her that the two of them were at his school and that he wondered if he could trust Draco. Snape, yes. The man had already proved his abilities. Draco was an unknown and Harry did not know if he should reveal himself to the blonde boy. Hermione had reassured Harry that Draco was a member of the PPs and that he was more likely to keep Harry's secrets, just to see how Harry would react to the Slytherin's presence. Hermione told him that Draco was more subdued this year and what to expect when he spoke to him. She also warned him that Draco was insisting that Harry Potter could not have a normal year. It was "out of his reach" and Harry agreed with him. He had yet to have a normal year at Hogwarts.

He found himself surprised when Draco's first comment was something about Harry having a normal year. Harry bantered right back with Hermione's comments about the bouncing ferret joining the Light Side. Something had passed between the two of them in that instant that told the two of them that they were, if not friends, allies. Harry liked the feeling of having such an ally and wondered how much Draco knew about things going on at Hogwarts. He had, after all, access to places that Hermione did not. He would hear and see things differently than a Gryffindor. Harry's hand stilled as he realized he was drawing the person of his thoughts. Draco Malfoy's face stared out at him from the paper. The scar was prominent and looked painful. Harry had seen that the first second he had looked at the other boy. No one else, it appeared, had seen the fine lines that denoted pain around his mouth and eyes. All Harry had to do was look at the scar to tell that it was no ordinary scar and was still causing Draco pain whenever he moved his head to one side or moved his mouth to talk. Someone had cursed it to cause the pain and Draco Malfoy felt that pain.

A simple wish for his magic to end the curse and physical contact dispelled the curse and left only scar tissue behind. Harry had hoped to be so discreet that no one would hear him, but Draco had heard the whispered comment, and worse, had felt Harry working the magic. It appeared that no one had heard the truth of it from Draco. No one had asked Harry what he did. He wasn't inclined to enlighten anyone, even if they asked.

He had played “confused” when the adults had questioned him about what had happened to him. He didn’t want everyone knowing about everything right away. He would tell Paul, of course, and Remus after a while, once the men had some distance to their own feelings of worry (Harry had seen it, even if others had not). He was unsure of whether or not he should tell his aunt. She did seem more accepting (she had said the word MAGIC) and worried about him. Aunt Petunia had shown a different side of herself when Harry had watched her through scrying and he had scryed more than once, just to watch her. He liked seeing the way she looked at him while he was asleep. It was almost the same look she wore when Dudley was sick. Worried, and concerned, but also very caring. Harry shut his eyes against the memory and fought back his feelings on the subject. He was not ready to approach that subject! He could worry about that once Voldemort was gone. He was startled when the door opened to the infirmary and three familiar faces peeked around the door.

“Over here!” He whispered to Sparky, Bug, and Chef. The three heads turned as one and Sparky left the other two behind as he made for Harry’s bed. “What are you doing here?” He whispered to the three.

“We came to see you.” Bug said as though it was fairly obvious. “None of the teachers, nurses, or doctors were talking when we asked about you.” He pulled Harry’s file from its holder and started paging through it.

“What happened, Evan?” Sparky asked.

“I’m not sure. One minute, I was having a nightmare. The next, well, I wake up here under the ‘tender mercies’ of Dr. Lansky.” Harry shrugged and put his sketchbook back into his bag and tossed it on the floor. “Get your feet off the floor.” He told the rail thin boy next to him. “Dr. Lansky will probably blame me if you get sick, Sparky.”

“Um, we’re all sick!” Sparky explained as he climbed onto the end of Harry’s bed. “That’s why we’re here!” The four boys shared a smile and Chef relaxed enough to sit in the chair next to Harry’s bed. Harry

raised the head of his bed a bit more to allow him to sit up, rather than recline and pulled his feet towards him.

“How’s the eating coming?” he asked Sparky as he tossed a pillow for the other boy.

“It’s okay.” Sparky shrugged. “I eat something at every meal. I don’t like to eat, but I’m doing it.”

“That’s great, Sparky.” Harry told him. “Eating is important.” Harry nudged an extra blanket towards Sparky and his friend accepted it with a smile. Sparky, due to his being so thin, was always cold, no matter how much clothing he wore. He even wore a jumper during the summer months!

“Can you even read that?” Chef’s voice broke Harry’s thoughts and he looked up in time to see Bug nod as he paged through the rest of the file.

“Hmm. Yes, I can.” Bug said absently in response to Chef’s question. “I never told you guys, did I?” He asked as he flipped through the pages. “Part of the reason I am here is that everyone at my school hated me. I’m kind of gifted, or something. People don’t like different people.” Bug said as he gauged his friends’ reactions. Sparky smiled and shrugged, while Chef gave a slow nod. Harry mumbled that he certainly understood being different.

“People are stupid, dangerous animals.” Sparky said in a whisper. “We must hide from them.” The four boys exchanged glances before breaking into stifled laughter. They did not want to be caught by the doctor.

“So, Evan.” Harry looked up at his three friends. “Why are you having such bad nightmares that they send you to the infirmary?” Bug asked. Sparky nodded while Chef’s eyes told Harry that he was interested as well. Harry thought about his new friendships with these boys and wondered how much he could tell them.

“It’s hard to explain.” He started. Sparky scooted closer to Harry to allow Chef and Bug space on the bed. Harry continued after they had settled. “My parents died when I was really little and I sort of remember it happening. The person who killed them is thought to be dead, but he’s not. He’s after me now.” He stopped and wondered how far he should explain. His friends seemed to be taking this rather well.

“Why would he kill your parents?” Chef asked.

“He’s a terrorist, but not quite.” Harry tried to explain. “He thinks that certain people are better than everyone. He started to kill people who didn’t quite fit his profile of what a person should be and my parents tried to stop him. They were both police officers.” Harry figured a little white lie to enable them to understand the situation would not hurt them too badly.

“Hitler.” Bug said in a sad voice. “Hitler did the same thing during the second war world.” Harry nodded. He remembered studying the war just last week in history class (without the mention of Grindelwald).

“He’s like that, then. He has a few followers, but thankfully, not many. Not enough to get to me wherever I go. I usually attend the same boarding school both my parents went to and that’s how he found me. He has almost killed me several times.”

“How many?” Bug asked.

“Actual attempts or where I have seen him and he has seen me?” Harry asked in a calm voice.

“Attempts?” Bug seemed unsure. Harry nodded and counted mentally.

“I’d say about five times that I know of.” Harry told his friends. “Maybe six, but I’m not really sure about that last one.” He shrugged. A whispered question from Chef made Harry pause.

“Why?” Chef’s question was a good one, and indeed, one Harry wanted answered. Why was Voldemort trying to kill him? What was so important about a prophecy and the actions afterwards? So Harry had some great luck and managed to escape Voldemort several times over. Why would he continue hunting Harry now?

“I...don’t know.” Harry admitted. “He tried to kill me when I was baby and gave me this.” Harry gestured towards the scar. “I managed to survive and he left for a while. He’s still trying to kill me, even though I’m not much of a threat. I would leave him alone if he left me alone, but I don’t think he’d go for that. I think he’s a bit mad.” Nice understatement there, Harry. Brilliant.

“No wonder you have nightmares!” Sparky hissed. “Someone trying to kill you.” He shook his head and sighed. “So, that’s why you have two different names.” Harry’s head snapped up.

“How’d you know about that?” He demanded. If Sparky was magical and had been leading Harry on this whole time...

“I overheard Paul talking to some guy wearing black clothes in the middle of the night. I went for something to drink in the kitchens and they passed by me.” He wrapped his blanket around his shoulders and looked at Bug’s face. “What? I’m allowed in the kitchens when ever I want!”

“I think I’ve just found my new best friend.” Bug said with a greedy glint in his eye. Bug was currently in a growth spurt and constantly hungry. “How much ice cream can you carry?”

“What is your real name?” Chef asked, stopping Bug’s interest in Sparky’s unrestrained kitchen access.

“You can’t use it or tell anyone.” Harry cautioned them. “You have to promise you won’t. He can’t find me. There is no protection here outside my anonymity. Do you all swear?” The three boys nodded. “Okay. My real name is Harry Potter.”

"I like Evan better." Sparky told him. "I'll be happy to continue using it."

"That's fine, Sparky." Harry gave his odd young friend a smile. "Just don't tell anyone." Sparky gave his solemn promise that no one would find his friend if he could help it. Harry leaned back against the pillows and smiled. He had friends here, friends who did not care that he had kept so much from them. They just accepted that he had reasons and understood that he would tell them more when the time came. He liked that. No one had exploded, no one had demanded he tell them, and no one had thought less of him for keeping secrets. A sneaky little voice in the back of his mind said not like Ron; he ignored the voice and accepted the idea of a game of cards.

"Hurry, Draco. We were away long enough." Draco rushed after him and up the path towards the castle. Severus knew that Dumbledore would be wanting to know where the two of them had been for such a long time and he had no ready answers. His brain conjured and dismissed as many possibilities as there were Bertie Bott's Flavors, each more unlikely than the last. What in the world was he going to tell Dumbledore?

"Ah, Severus. There you are." Dumbledore met him and Draco at the main doors with a kindly smile on his face. "If you would report to my office..."

Draco stepped away from Snape and held up his backpack. "Thank you for helping me sort that out, Professor. I am in your debt." With those words, Draco turned and hurried away.

"Draco?" Dumbledore called after him. Draco turned and looked at the man. "With what has Severus helped you?"

"A situation at my manor." Draco explained. "It is a private matter." He elucidated to his headmaster. "I'm sure you understand, sir." He turned back to his head of house. "Thank you again, Severus."

Snape knew at that moment exactly whom would be the next Head of House for Slytherin, with all the signs about Draco flashing in his face.

He only had to wonder how he would break it to the boy. Snape nodded at Draco and made the hand signal that said that they would talk later. Draco smiled and rushed away to his classes.

“You are doing wonders with that boy, Severus.” Dumbledore said as he stepped up alongside Snape. “What, precisely, was the problem?” Dumbledore tried to appear completely nonchalant, but Severus knew what that look meant for him. Dumbledore was digging for information.

Snape shook his head and sighed. “I cannot tell you, Headmaster. You know that.” Snape hedged. “I am not allowed to reveal my advisee’s matters to anyone not directly involved. And you are not.” Snape folded his robes around himself and nodded to the headmaster. “I will resume my classes now, headmaster.” Snape swept away from Dumbledore, thanking every deity he knew of that Draco was such a smart lad.

“How were your classes?” Snape asked as Draco entered their quarters. Draco dropped his book bag in its customary place next to the door and sank into the couch. He loosened his tie and put his feet up on the coffee table. “Feet down.” Snape said without looking. Draco lowered his feet to the floor with a smirk and sat properly.

“They were okay.” Draco told him with a sigh. “Hermione and Ginny wanted to know where I was this morning.” Draco shrugged off his heavy outer robe and tossed it over the end of the couch. Snape rolled his eyes at this display of teenage rebellion for the rules of tidiness and banished the robe to the boy’s room.

Snape turned to Draco with a smirk on his face. “Turning into quite the ladies’ man, are we?” He poured out a drink for himself and held up the bottle.

Draco shook his head at the offered drink. “Ladies’ man?” He asked with a touch of sarcasm. “That’s right, Severus. I need to beat them off with sticks. Just like you.”

Snape snorted and took a sip of his drink. "Well, with your charm and charisma, I thought you would have had a girlfriend by now."

"I'm too busy protecting my life." Draco sneered at him.

Snape looked over the practiced expression and nodded. "Better, but you need a bit more loathing in that voice when you do that." Snape relaxed into his own armchair and considered his charge. "When did Miss Granger and Miss Weasley become 'Hermione' and 'Ginny'?" Snape asked.

Draco shrugged and removed his tie. "It is hard to continue calling 'friends' by their last names." Draco explained. "They both know where I was. Potter was in communication with them sometime today." Snape nodded. It was most likely through the Mini-Messengers. "How did you and that Sensei guy meet?"

Snape saw the technique for what it was and decided to indulge the boy for now. "Leonard?" Snape thought back to days he thought best forgotten. "Leonard and I met when I was a little younger than you." Snape relaxed back into his chair and closed his eyes. "I had been tormented by Potter's father and his friends most of my life. Once I reached thirteen or so, I decided to do something about it, but I wasn't sure what." He shrugged and sipped at his drink. "My father suggested self-defense lessons. I was, of course, horrified that he would suggest a Muggle method to fight magic and told him as much." Snape snickered to himself and shook his head. "How wrong I was." He told the boy. "I had no choice after that. My father signed me up for classes and ensured that I attended every one, whether I wanted to or not."

"I was not impressed the first two weeks. I saw nothing I could use against bullies with magic. Even less that I could use against anyone physically attacking me." He shrugged as though to ward off his own thoughtlessness. "It remained like that for the first two weeks of my summer vacation until an assistant teacher, a rather young assistant teacher, appeared. That teacher was Leonard."

“He is half-Japanese and half-English. He spent some time in both countries as a child and retains a rather different view of life because of it. His grandfather taught him many things during his visits in Japan and he passed some of that on to a rather annoying, petulant teenager who thought he was better than everyone else.” Snape nodded to himself. “He saw something in me that the regular teacher did not and changed my classes to everyday, for three or four hours. I had a hard time reconciling myself to learning from someone just a few years my senior, but he thumped me soundly until I started fighting back, and then he continued pushing me until I forgot that a person was supposed to exist without pain and bruises covering most of his body.”

“Leonard adopted me as his ‘little brother’ and he made sure that I was more than able to defend myself once September first came up. The train ride was different that year. I did not back down from the bullies and if they happened to get a curse on me, well, they were given fitting retribution later. Potter’s arrogance worked against him then. He could not admit that someone shorter than him had beaten him without a wand. A few other benefits happened as well, on a Hogsmeade weekend when I allowed myself to wear Muggle clothing and several female classmates saw what the workouts did for me.” Snape chuckled to himself at the memory and drained his glass before setting it aside. “They were nice benefits.” He chuckled to himself again and decided that he had no need for more alcohol. Draco must have felt the same, for he stood and moved the glass away from Snape.

“Leonard was waiting for me when I returned home the following summer. He allowed me exactly five minutes to store my trunk away and say hello to my parents before he dragged me off to the dojo, bemoaning the fact that I had somehow lost speed over the school year.”

“Dojo?” Draco questioned the foreign word.

“School. It is Japanese for school.” Snape explained. Draco nodded and Snape continued with his story. “He and I trained together, and caused our main teacher so much grief, for several years, until I

became a Death Eater, of course.” Snape brushed away the memories of that time. “I had no idea he was still alive. He always said that he would infuriate our sensei so much the man would run him through one day.” Snape shrugged. “A small world that Potter managed to find him and became his ‘deshi’.”

“Sorry? Deshi?” Draco interrupted again.

Snape fought a sigh and closed his eyes, asking for patience from every force out there. “A ‘deshi’ is a student, but more than a student. It is more like an apprentice or disciple. The relationship is much closer than student and teacher. It is closer to what we are, you and me.” Snape explained, hoping that Draco would understand. The boy still looked confused. “You are not this slow. Let me try again. Leonard took a special interest in Potter and decided to teach him directly, one on one, to pass on his knowledge. Just as I am doing with you. He is probably teaching Potter things that are practical, rather than the traditional ranks. Potter will be able to fight, coming out of the training, rather than just compete. Do you understand now?”

“I think so. Potter won’t just be a fighter, will he?” Draco asked as he looked at his teacher for confirmation.

“Exactly as Leonard did with me. He will come out of training much more than a fighter. He will emerge a warrior, Merlin help us all.” Snape muttered.

“And you’re teaching me the same things he taught you?” Draco asked from the couch.

“Yes.” Snape saw Draco fit all the pieces together in just a few seconds. He nodded as Draco looked at him again. “It can only benefit you. A person who knows only one way to fight will only fight one way. You have at least three ways to fight now. We only have to hope that Death Eaters will have only one way to fight.” Draco nodded in agreement and thought that knowing more than one way to fight could save him some day. Being a warrior, having the same skills as Potter, and maybe something more, would help that survival.

Paul sat in his office, burning the proverbial midnight oil with flames large enough to show to outer space. He was worried about Harry and he was trying to find some magical answer by paging through his notes, hoping that somehow, an answer would present itself to him. Harry hadn't said much about his nightmares, but the two of them had talked a bit earlier in the day. Something was wrong with the boy, but he was not sure what it was, or more importantly, what had caused it. Paul was determined to find out what was troubling his young patient.

The phone rang and broke him out of his concentration. Paul reached out a hand and snapped the receiver up to his ear. "Yes?" He demanded of the caller, just a little upset that someone would be willing to interrupt him. He heard a frantic voice on the other end, explaining what was going on. "I'll be right there." Paul said in a rush as he got to his feet and replaced the phone in the cradle. He ran out his door and down the hallway, desperate to reach his patient with the most speed possible.

The scene inside the infirmary told him all he needed to know within seconds. Harry was trapped. Nightmare or vision, Paul wasn't sure, but he was trapped inside his own mind. The doctor was confining Harry to the bed, but that only seemed to increase Harry's thrashing and screams. Paul noticed all of this in the seconds it took for him to reach Harry's bedside. He slipped a quick hand into his pocket and turned on the tape recorder. Harry needed to hear how bad his nightmares were to believe it. "Harry!" Paul motioned for the doctor to release Harry's arms and the doctor did as he was asked with a shrug. "Harry! Wake up!" Harry rolled off the bed and scrambled for shelter behind it. "Harry!"

"Leave me alone!" Harry's voice rasped out from behind the headboard. "I don't want to do this!" Paul glanced at the doctor.

"Could you please get some lukewarm water and flip the switch for the lights?" Paul asked his colleague. The man nodded and did as asked. Paul could see Harry's feet poking out from behind the headboard. "What is it that you don't want to do?" Paul asked Harry calmly.

“This stupid tournament! I’m too young and I don’t want to do it!” Harry snapped at Paul’s question.

“Do you know who I am, Harry?” Paul asked. Something about the way Harry was speaking gave Paul a few clues to what was going on.

“Of course I know who you are, Professor!” Harry’s voice had a quality of ‘why such an obvious question’ to it.

“Well then, tell me who I am.” Paul told Harry. Harry took a deep breath and answered with a “Professor Dumbledore” in a panicked voice.

“I don’t want to do it. Please don’t make me, sir.” Harry pleaded with his therapist. “I already have everyone staring at my scar. I can’t do this too! Please!” Harry’s voice panicked again and Paul decided that it was time to end this dream.

“Please come out from behind there, Harry. Everything is going to be alright.” Paul said as he bent down on one knee near Harry.

“Really?” Harry’s voice came again, as petulant as a child and just as hopeful. Paul ached to hear such trust in a question. Harry had truly believed that Dumbledore was able to fix everything.

“Really. I’ve got you now. It’s going to be okay.” Paul coaxed the boy out from behind the headboard and into his arms. “It’s going to be okay, Harry.” He dropped his voice to a calm level and repeated the statement several times until Harry stopped shivering. “Wake up, Harry.” He tapped Harry on the shoulder several times, in the most annoying fashion possible he could devise. “It’s time to wake up.” He told his patient. Harry pulled away from the touch and groaned. “That’s it. It’s time to wake up. The dream is over.” Harry shook his head. “Come on, wake up.” Paul advised. “Wake up.”

Harry’s eyes opened slowly and he looked up at Paul with a bewildered expression. “Do you know me, Harry?” Paul asked in a calm voice.

“Paul?” Harry squinted up at Paul. “What happened?”

“What do you remember?” Harry shook his head and sat up on his own.

“I...” He shook his head to clear it and took a sip of the water Paul held to his lips. “The Triwizard Tournament. Just after my name came out of the cup. I was scared. Everyone said people have died during past tournaments. I was too young to compete, but someone wanted me to, anyway. I didn’t want to compete.”

“I know you didn’t want to compete.” Paul told him. “You were having a dream. It’s okay now.” Harry nodded and handed the glass to Paul. “Why don’t you get up in bed?” Paul suggested to Harry. Harry looked around as though he had not seen the floor before.

“How did I get down here?” Harry asked in confusion. “I was sleeping.” Harry sounded very young when he was confused.

“You rolled off the bed and dashed for cover. It’s okay. Do you want something to help you sleep?” Paul asked as he gave Harry a hand back to his bed.

Harry pulled the covers over himself and thought about it. He knew what that meant. Sleeping pills. Dreamless Sleep. “Yes, please.” Paul nodded and motioned for the doctor to retrieve them. “Paul?” Paul looked down at Harry. “Do you think I seek attention?” Harry asked in a quiet voice.

“No.” Paul told him. “If anything, I think you don’t seek enough attention from the adults around you.” Paul accepted the pills from the doctor and motioned for Harry to sit up. Harry obeyed the signal and took the glass of water. “What makes you ask?”

“The newspapers.” Harry said as he popped the pills before drinking water. “Urgh. Can’t you make them taste better?” Harry asked as he sipped a bit more water.

“Why would the newspapers say you seek attention?” Paul asked Harry as the boy set the water down on his nightstand and closed his eyes.

“Fudge.” Harry answered. “Can I go to sleep now?”

“Go ahead. I’ll see you in the morning.” Paul watched over Harry until he was asleep.

“Fudge?” The doctor said. “What has fudge to do with seeking attention and nightmares?” Paul looked at the doctor and sighed.

“I wish I knew. Please don’t say anything about this until I talk to him tomorrow.” The doctor nodded.

“I hope I get to hear about this Triwizard thing he was talking about.” He commented as he made a note on Harry’s chart. “You should get some rest, too, Paul.” He explained. “Harry, or Evan, or whatever his name is, will need you tomorrow.”

“Thanks for understanding. I’ll explain as soon as I am able to do so.” Paul said as he shook his colleague’s hand.

“You’d better. That boy is an enigma, and I always liked puzzles.” Paul smirked and bid the man a good night and went to his own quarters. Harry had presented many things tonight that needed addressed as soon as possible. He shut off the tape recorder and sighed. How was he going to approach Harry?

Author's Note: Okay, all! That's it for now. I don't know when the next update will be. I have a million things to do before school starts again. Thanks for reading!

Author's Note: Hi all! Sorry about the delay. School started again and I'm already procrastinating. This chapter is long, to make up for the wait.

Dumbledore sat at his desk and glared into space. He was at a loss as to how to find his student. Harry Potter was in England, yes. That part of the search had been very easy. A simple scrying spell told him that much. Discovering anything more elaborate than that was a wee bit harder. He had every Muggle school, boarding and day, searched thoroughly. Not one harbored his pupil. Mrs. Dursley had hidden the boy well and now Dumbledore could not find his student! There was an unknown element at work, hindering his every move. Something was blocking his efforts. He hesitated to say it was his own wards (how embarrassing that they would not listen to him), but it was becoming more likely that the wards he had set to keep track of Harry were now working against him.

Fudge was becoming more demanding every day. He wanted to see Harry Potter and he was willing to go to great lengths to make it so. Dumbledore had managed to thwart him so far, but it was becoming more difficult to do so. He had gained the support of the Wizengamot and they, too, were anxious to see Harry Potter, and talk to him, if they could. Their excuse? His welfare. They seemed to think that Dumbledore was somehow endangering his welfare by "secluding him from his peer group and additional mental support". Dumbledore smirked and dropped the letter from the ruling body back to the desk. The Wizengamot would riot if they knew the Potter boy was missing. Aurors would be unleashed on unsuspecting Muggles and schools, just to locate a child. A thoroughly annoying child Dumbledore could not find!

Dumbledore turned to his Chocolate Frog card and said a spell. The manufacturers would remove him from the cards if they knew to what purpose he put his images every day. He had heard rumors of his omniscience. He was amazed to find that no one had yet worked out how he knew what he knew about his students when they arrived at Hogwarts. He tapped his wand on the surface of his card and started to page through images his pictures had taken for him. He only used this in extreme circumstances, but it was a way to keep an eye on his children. If Harry Potter had touched a Chocolate Frog card, or even

was in close proximity in the last few months, Dumbledore would have an image to work with. He worked his way backwards through images, discarding each one when he did not see Harry's signature in any of them.

Almost an hour passed before he came to a possible image. There was a signature that seemed similar to Harry's. It differed just the slightest bit from the boy's, but the different signature could be explained by almost anything that disturbed the lad, from stress to hunger or even extreme happiness. The face that held the card clenched the matter. Hermione Granger's face appeared before Dumbledore's eyes. It appeared that she was talking to someone. She knew where Harry was! Dumbledore sat back in his chair and smiled to himself. "I think we might find him, Fawkes." Dumbledore told his companion. The phoenix chirped a few notes and hid his beak beneath his wing again.

Dumbledore wrote a note to Minerva with a request for a meeting first thing in the morning. She was the boy's Head of House, after all, and she should know him the best out of all the other professors. She would know if the boy would be trying to return to Hogwarts or not, and if so, how they could help him. He was ready to try anything to find the boy. He had relied on Remus for so much lately that he didn't want to tax the man overmuch. Remus was looking especially strained lately and was almost never home. While he did receive a small salary for his services to the Order, it was not enough to support him and he had found a part-time job in the Muggle world that was willing to work around his full moon requirements. He was happy for the werewolf, he really was, but Remus being so busy was an inconvenience to the Order.

Dumbledore pushed back from his desk and moved to the shelves that held his instruments. He stared at them for a long while before deciding that nothing could be done for the rest of the night. He sent his note to Minerva and decided to head to bed. He was feeling optimistic about the situation now. Harry would be home soon and everything would be alright.

"I want you to come back if you start feeling weak or tired." Dr. Lansky said once he finished examining Harry.

“Yes, sir.” Harry agreed. Anything to get him out of the infirmary! He felt fine and he just wanted to return to class and his friends. Was that so much to ask?

“Alright. Get out of here.” Dr. Lansky mussed Harry’s hair and nudged him towards the door. That was all the invitation Harry needed. He shouldered his backpack and nearly ran down the hall to get away from the doctor. It wasn’t that he disliked Dr. Lansky. Far from it. The man had excellent bedside manner and could see what Harry needed without much effort. He also seemed to know how far to push Harry and when to let him go. Harry just disliked being in the hospital itself.

Breakfast just ended in the cafeteria and Harry was released in time to attend his classes as usual. He had missed his classes while he was with Bleys. Harry shifted his thoughts away from his old mentor and focused on where he needed to be. Tuesday? Spanish at nine o’clock. He turned down the right hallway and nearly walked into someone. “Evan!” Harry reached out and caught Julie as she stumbled.

“Sorry.” He apologized as he righted her. “I was thinking.” Well, it was not the best excuse he had ever used, but it was better than nothing.

“That’s okay.” She said and gave him a small smile. “I heard you were in the infirmary again. I’m glad you’re okay.”

Harry nodded and gave a sheepish smile. “I spend half my life in the care of doctors.” He confided. “Thanks, though.” Silence fell between the two of them again. There was something Harry had wanted to say, but he couldn’t remember.

“Well, it’s almost time for class. I’ll see you later?” She said as she took a step away.

“Huh?” Stop spacing out! “Oh, right. I’ll see you later.” Harry took two steps before he stopped himself and turned. “Julie?” Julie stopped and turned back around. “Um, I was...” He trailed off and

stared at her for a few seconds. You, Harry Potter, are an idiot. Just ask her! The worst she can do is say no! "I was wondering if you had a date for the Halloween dance?" There. It was up to her now.

"No, not yet." She told him. "Why?" Right. Potter, you must ask her!

"Would you like to go with me, then?" Harry mentally crossed his fingers. He watched as Julie's face grew thoughtful. Were all girls taught how to do that, as a way to ensure that the man asking them out was as nervous as possible?

"I'm not interested in a relationship right now." She said slowly, as afraid of hurting his feelings.

"Oh! Neither am I, honestly. I just thought, you know, going as friends would be fun. You'd always have someone to dance with that way." He admitted.

"Sure." She said with a bright smile. "I'd like to go as friends." She glanced at her watch and sighed. "I've got to go."

"See you in front of the gym at 7:30 on Friday?" Harry asked as he started to back up.

"Yes. I'll see you then, Evan." Julie hurried away from Harry with a smile and a wave as Harry turned and went to his own classroom. He tried to tell himself that it was only a 'friends' thing and that he shouldn't be so excited. He wanted to be very calm about this. He just couldn't fight down the sappy grin on his face or the light step. He made it to his classroom and nearly danced to his seat.

"What are you so happy about?" Bug asked through his morning grumpiness.

"I have a date for the dance." Harry admitted, still slightly dazed at the idea. It was so easy, to just ask someone. What had been so hard in his fourth year?

“What? Who?” Bug woke up and stared at Harry.

“Julie. It’s just a ‘friend’ thing, but at least this way, we’ll both have someone to dance with.”

“You can dance?” Bug asked in a whisper.

“Can’t you?” Harry asked in wonder.

“No. I never learned.” Bug admitted.

Harry fought down his amusement (he remembered his fourth year all too well) and smiled at Bug. “It’s not hard. It’s just different.” Their teacher came into the room at the moment and ended the conversations. “I’ll give you a few tips later.” Harry whispered as he took out his notebook. Bug shot him a grateful smile and turned his attention to his teacher. He had a date to the school dance and he was looking forward to his Darth Vader costume. Dancing would be a little difficult in the costume, but he was hoping to intimidate anyone who said that Darth Vader shouldn’t dance. He tried to imagine Darth Vader waltzing and nearly laughed aloud. Darth Vader waltzing. That was an image Paul would appreciate.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” Paul asked the teenager across from him. Harry looked up from his hands. “Or do I need to guess?”

“What do you mean?” Harry had just sat down. What had happened that Paul wanted to know?

“You don’t remember having a rather vivid nightmare last night?” Paul asked in disbelief.

“ Oh, that.” Harry shrugged. “It was nothing big. I’ve had nightmares...” Harry trailed off and looked down.

“How long has this been going on, Harry?” Paul asked as he moved to sit next to Harry on the couch.

“Um...” Harry trailed off. “It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“Harry, you’re not fine.” Paul said as he shook his head. “Far from it, especially if you’re keeping things like this.”

“It’s not a big deal.” Harry insisted as he stood up. “Can I take Zen out?” Paul studied Harry and nodded. The distraction might help Harry open up. Harry took the snake out and allowed it the snake to wrap around his arm.

“Do you remember having a nightmare last night?” Paul tried again.

“I remember dreaming.” Harry told him as he stroked the snake. Zen let out a hiss that sounded like he was extraordinarily happy and would be unwilling to leave Harry’s arm and caresses. “It was scary, but that’s all.”

“Just scary?” Paul took out a tape and showed it to Harry. “May I play something for you?” Paul asked as he held up the tape. Harry nodded. Paul slid the tape into an extra player and pushed the play button.

Harry stared at the player as he heard his own voice come from the speaker. He ended up back on the couch next to Paul. Harry shook his head and looked away from the player. He pulled his legs towards him and put his head on his knees. Zen uncurled from Harry’s arm and settled on the couch next to him, hissing something at the boy. “Could you turn it off, please?” Harry’s muffled voice asked Paul. Paul reached out and stopped the tape. “I understand why you’re concerned now.” Harry told him. “I don’t remember the dream. I just know that I was dreaming and that I was upset. I don’t remember the details.” He admitted.

“No details?” Paul supposed that made sense. There were times he could not remember his own dreams. “Just this dream or all of your dreams?”

“ I don’t remember most of my dreams.” Harry confessed. “Sometimes I’ll remember a phrase or a scene, but that’s all.” He picked up Zen and stroked the snake. “Sometimes I do remember my entire dream. Most of the time, I can’t remember a thing.”

“Hmm. I understand why you didn’t seem concerned.” Paul offered as a compromise. “Do you remember having those feelings about the tournament?” Paul asked.

“I knew I was out of my depth.” Harry told him. “I really didn’t want to compete. I was having a hard enough time fitting in with the kids from the other schools staring at me. I told you we had a bunch of foreign students there?” Harry asked.

“ Yes, you did.” Paul reassured him. “So, you didn’t want to compete?”

“People have died during this tournament.” Harry told him. “That’s why they quit having it in the first place. The year I competed was the first in a while and they haven’t had another since then.” Harry shrugged. “The age limit was there to ensure that no one would be seriously hurt. I guess they figured that anyone seventeen or eighteen knew as much magic as they could. I was only fourteen. I knew I couldn’t match the magic of someone who had three or more years of education.”

“That must have been a lot of pressure.” Paul said in a quiet voice.

“It was horrible.” Harry told him. “I was this close,” Harry held two of his fingers a millimeter apart “to quitting Hogwarts, just so I wouldn’t have to compete. That wasn’t much of an option.”

Paul placed his pen back on his desk and shut his notebook. “Why not?”

Harry gave Paul an odd look before picking up Zen and stroking the snake. He shrugged and lapsed into silence. Paul waited patiently for Harry to come to an answer and his patience was rewarded. “I would have gone back to the Dursleys’ and they would not have liked that

very much at all. It would have been hard to go to a Muggle school after so much time at Hogwarts, and Uncle Vernon would have been very angry with me.”

“Why would your uncle be angry with you?” Paul studied Harry while the boy thought over his answer. The boy was tense, yes, and wary, but he was still willing to talk and that was the only important thing at the moment.

“My uncle doesn’t like me.” Harry answered with a sigh. “Or magic. I’m both.” He gave a funny grin. “I’m myself.” He shook his head and curled up on the couch again. “I couldn’t go back to that.”

“What do you think of him now?” Paul asked.

Harry gave him another odd look before looking away. He shrugged and ran a finger down Zen’s head. The snake left out a soft hiss and shut his eyes in pleasure. Harry smirked at something the snake said and answered him before turning his attention back to Paul. “He’s still the same man Aunt Petunia said he would try. I guess that’s what important, right?”

“What do you think?” Paul returned.

Harry stared off into space for several minutes before speaking up. “Can we talk about something else?” Paul nodded and cast about for a subject. He knew that Harry hated talking about his family. This was the largest amount of speech he had from Harry concerning a relative that was not Petunia. It was progress. Not much, but some. Perhaps Harry would be willing to open up a bit later.

“I’d like to talk about your dreams a bit more.” Paul said. He looked to Harry to see his reaction. It was cautious, but accepting. He continued. “I think that they may be a sign of something wrong of which you are not even aware.” He explained. “That may be why you are unable to remember them when you’re awake.” Harry’s face was pensive and concentrated. “I doubt you’d have such a strange reaction in a dream if there was not something you weren’t expressing then, something that you needed to express.”

“Right. What does that mean?” Harry asked as Zen curled out his shoulders.

“You tend to bottle emotions, right?” Paul said as he turned and dug into his mini-fridge for some water. He handed a bottle to Harry and took one for himself. Harry nodded in agreement with Paul’s statement. “That all comes out later in one burst, doesn’t it?”

“Sometimes.” Harry said slowly, drawing out the word as though he almost didn’t agree with it. Paul raised an eyebrow and looked at Harry. Harry saw the look and capitulated. “All the time.” He answered truthfully.

Paul gave him a smile. “Imagine that some part of that bottled up feeling broke off from the rest and buried itself.” Paul suggested. “You forgot it and therefore forgot about the feelings and circumstances under which you felt them.”

“It’s possible.” Harry said softly before turning into Ball Harry. Paul left him alone. This was a rather difficult subject and he wanted Harry as comfortable as possible. The barrier wouldn’t harm him now.

“Well, what I think is that you have parts to your past that were just too much for you, too hard for you to face, that you simply repressed those feelings to survive.” Paul told him, motioning for Harry to drink some water. Harry complied with Paul’s instruction.

“What does that mean?”

“You have feelings and the like that you forgot about and now, cannot remember, because you choose not to remember them.” Paul explained.

“Could I have forgotten something important?” Harry asked as he looked up at Paul from his study of Zen’s scales.

“You remember things from your fourth year, correct?” Paul asked. Harry nodded and sat up a little straighter. “How many details do you have?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked with his brow knitted in confusion.

“Do you remember, for instance, what you ate the day of the first task?” Paul asked.

“I tend to go off food when I’m nervous. I don’t think I ate much at all.” Harry admitted. What did remembering what he ate have to do with anything? He couldn’t remember what he ate that morning, much less a morning over a year ago!

“What do you remember?” Paul pressed him.

“A dragon that had huge claws, big sharp teeth, a tail, and it could fly.” Harry explained. “I don’t see what that has to do with anything.” He returned his feet to the floor and sighed. What in the world is Paul trying to say?

“Do you remember anything that happened that day besides the dragon?” Paul asked quietly, trying to reach a calming tone to help Harry. “Or after? Directly after?”

Harry allowed his eyes to fall shut and tried to remember what Paul had asked him. What had he done that morning before he faced the dragon? Hermione and he talked for a while...excited students...wasn’t there a party that night? Or was that after the second task? Hadn’t Rita Skeeter been there? That awful interview? When had that happened? Why couldn’t he remember? Think, Potter! You can remember this! Harry fought through his memories until he had a headache. He opened his eyes and shook his head. “Why can’t I remember?” He whispered the question. He was almost afraid to hear the answer.

“You repressed things that were too much for you. The task you remember, because that was the central focus. It was reinforced by those around you. Your own feelings, anger, fear, resentment,

anything along those lines, were repressed to enable you to respond as others hoped you would. You are very good at reading what others want from you and you react as they want. What is important now is recovering those memories so that your own feelings about past events will make sense to you."

"How do we do that?" Harry asked, thoroughly engaged in the idea. He would like to know why he resented so much that happened that year. And figure out why Dumbledore was so cautious in his fifth year and why he hadn't really talked with me. He said he had reasons, but they couldn't have all been bad, right? He could have taken a few minutes to explain things better than he did!

"We have several options available to us. We'll just need to try one and see what happens." Paul told him with a hopeful smile.

"What are they?" Harry asked as he stood to return Zen to his cage. "The options?" He clarified.

Paul waited until Harry sat back down. "Hmm. Well, there are several ways we can go about this. We could just talk and I'll try to draw the memories out, the little details, with questions. Sometimes, that is the only thing needed and you will remember it all on your own. The dreams themselves will help. I could put a recorder in your room so that you will be able to hear things you say during your dreams. There is even hypnosis, but I would like to keep that as a last resort option. The human mind, for all we've studied it, is still very much a mystery, and I don't like to go prancing about in someone's head without a firm idea of what I need to do."

"Which would you recommend?" Harry asked.

Paul sat back and shook his head. "It does not matter to me. You're going to be the one doing all the work, remember? This is your therapy. Which would be easier for you?" Paul wanted Harry to make his own decision on this matter. Paul, personally, would like to see what Harry kept behind his mask (and thus answer many questions he had currently), but he would stay within what Harry wanted. He would not say no to taking a peek inside Harry's brain, but resisted

the urge to steer the boy to the easiest path. If it would be easiest at all. Few people actually managed successful therapy with hypnosis and some could not be hypnotized at all. He was curious as to which group Harry belonged.

“If we talked, how would we do it?” Harry asked as he dug through his backpack. He whipped out a notebook and clicked his pen.

“Just as we do now, but we would focus on events and I would direct the talk to the details. Things you only vaguely remember or events about which you have conflicting feelings and can’t remember why. I’m guessing that you have several events?” He asked. Harry nodded emphatically. “Thought so. It would mostly be question and answer until you can remember everything possible.”

Harry nodded and paused as he wrote several things down in his notebook. “And the recordings? How would that work?”

“I would place a tape recorder in your room at night, somewhere near your bed. We would be listening for your nightmares and anything you say during them. We’ll go through the tape the next day and we’ll try to figure out what your feelings were and what you don’t remember about them.” Paul explained.

“And the hypnosis?” Harry asked.

“Hypnosis is a very odd technique. There are some people who cannot be hypnotized.” Paul warned. “A common hypnotic technique is regression. What that means is, once you are hypnotized, I would take you back to your mindset at the time of the event, and then I would include a trigger, so when you ‘wake up’, you will not only remember everything, but also your feelings involved. It is tough, because you’ll have all these memories and feelings that seem new to you. It may take a while to accept fully both the memories and the feelings.”

“Why are some people unable to be hypnotized?” Harry asked.

“We’re not sure.” Paul ran a hand through his hair. “Some psychologists think it is because people do not believe in it. Others feel that the subject has an uncommonly strong will, and others yet think that only certain types of people are able to undergo the procedure.” He checked the clock. They only had a few minutes left, and he had so much more he had wanted to cover with Harry today.

“Do you think I could be hypnotized?” Harry asked, just as Paul thought he would.

“I’m not going to answer that.” Paul said with a small shake of the head. “I don’t want you having any preconceptions about it if it is our option.” He explained. “I’m afraid our time is up for now, kiddo.” He told his patient. Harry nodded and closed his notebook. “You have a class to get to. Martial arts, isn’t it?” He asked.

“Yes. Sensei is going to be hard in training today.” Harry complained. “He hasn’t been able to pick on me for two days.”

“Yes, that odd little coma thing.” Paul agreed. “That must be one of those dream things you don’t remember.” Paul commented. He saw Harry’s face change, as though he had something to say. “You okay, Harry?” He asked. He almost flinched in shock as Harry’s old mask slid into place.

“Fine.” Harry answered Paul with a small smile. “I’ll see you later?” He asked as he stood and shouldered his backpack.

“Sit down.” Paul demanded. Harry stopped and looked at Paul’s face. “That odd little coma thing is something we need to talk about. There is something you aren’t telling me.”

Harry sank down onto the sofa with only one thought in his head. Now what?

Author’s Note: Some of you may have noticed that I fixed Chapter 14. There’s a little problem. I’m certain I’m missing a part of it. Has anyone saved my story, or archived it somewhere? If you have, please message me or leave a review and let me know. I could swear

something big happens, but my brain can't keep all 38 chapters straight.

Author's Note: Okay. Sorry for the delay. I had the LSAT. I have no idea how I did, so I've barricaded myself in my room to console myself with the fact that I probably didn't get into law school this time round. Oh well. It enabled me to write. Harry and Hermione have a conversation in this. M Hermione. H Harry.

"I think you know exactly what happened with your little coma thing." Paul said slowly as he pulled open his desk drawer. He retrieved a candle and matches and set them on his desk. "More than that, actually." Paul commented as he struck a match he glanced at Harry and touched the flame to the wick. "I believe that you not only know exactly what happened, but you purposely misled us." He sat back in his chair and regarded his charge. "What...I don't know. Maybe to protect yourself, to keep us from viewing you as different? Which is it, Harry?" Paul fell silent, allowing his look to convey his patience and steadfastness.

"I don't know what you mean." Harry said quickly. He was secretly racing through his mind, throwing up his Occlumency shields and organizing his thoughts away.

"Please don't insult my intelligence." Paul said quietly as he shifted to dim the lights a bit. "Why don't you start with the nightmare you were having?" Paul waited for Harry to respond.

Harry sat on the couch, wondering what, exactly, to say to Paul. Telling him about Bleys and a person who only existed within the covers of a book, and now, inside Harry's head, would not be an option. It could not be an option. Paul would think he was mad. Barking mad. Lockhart type mad. "Harry?" Harry looked from his hands and almost met Paul's eyes. "What was the nightmare about?" He asked quietly. "The one that caused your panic attack?"

Harry's eyes shifted to the candle on the desk. He could tell Paul about the nightmares. They would take a while to discuss and would give Paul something to think about. Harry decided to allow the nightmares and hoped it would be enough. "I was alone. There wasn't really a room or anything. Just an open space, but I knew it was inside." Harry paused and looked at the candle. The flare reminded

him of the fireplace in his common room. "I heard a voice ask 'Who are you?'" He stopped and stared at the candle, watching the wax drip down one side to gather in a pool in the bottom of the holder. "I looked around and said my name. The answer seemed to amuse the voice, because it chuckled at me. It added a question. It also asked 'what are you doing?'" Harry leaned his head back against the cushions and started some of his breathing techniques to stay calm. "I don't remember if I answered that time. There were mirrors then, and even though I could see myself in them, I could also see images of myself doing things from my past. There was a mask on my face...of my face, if that makes any sense." Paul nodded. Yes, that made perfect sense. Paul thought back to the crystal ball picture and fought back a shudder. Harry had many masks. Harry's voice brought Paul's attention back to the boy. "I couldn't get it off. I tried my wand, but it broke and the two pieces rolled away under the mirrors. The mirrors disappeared and both Voldemort and Dumbledore were there and they each had all of their followers. Dumbledore and the Order and Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Flip sides of the coin and me right in the middle. They weren't on opposite sides, though...just all mixed in together as though they didn't know they were supposed to be on opposite sides. Dumbledore and Voldemort came forward and started pulling me away. The voice came back and started...provoking me, I guess." Harry said with a shrug. "He said I was causing what Dumbledore and Voldemort were doing." Paul fought not to jerk out of his chair. The voice was a he and Harry told him as much. Good. Harry continued without noticing Paul's reaction. "He said that I liked being the Boy Who Lived and encouraged the fawning over me and the mobs of people." Harry shook his head ruefully and smirked. He stopped for a minute and just breathed, wondering how to proceed. This was not the dream that had caused his panic attack and he had no idea why he had started talking about it.

"I denied his claims, of course. He told me to do something about it. The mask was growing tighter each time I talked to him. Dumbledore was talking to me about...something. I don't remember what now. Voldemort was lecturing about how to do wordless spells. The voice kept talking throughout all of it; he said I loved all the attention, the press, being Gryffindor's Little Golden Boy, Dumbledore's Little Pet." Harry had worked himself into a temper and didn't seem to be able to

stop. This suited Paul just fine, as he needed to know what had happened. "I denied it. I hate all the attention I get. I don't want to be the Boy Who Lived and pretty much told him I didn't want any of it. He told me to do something about it. Something happened then." Paul wondered if Harry knew he just managed a clever play on words. "Wandless magic. The mask fell off, the chair and chains," what? "holding me disappeared, and Voldemort and Dumbledore were gone. I was worn out and just laid there, not really caring what happened." Harry refused to go further into his dreams. He already felt that he had said too much. He relaxed a bit and dropped his feet to the floor. Maybe Paul would let him go now.

"Who's he?" Paul asked in a calm voice.

"Ble-" Harry cut himself off.

Paul raised an eyebrow and fixed a rather interested look on Harry. "Sorry. Didn't catch that."

Harry shook his head and shrugged. "Nothing." He told Paul. He pulled up his legs again into Ball Harry.

"Who was it, Harry?" Paul pressed the boy. "Who was in your dream?" Paul scooted his chair closer so that he was directly in front of his patient. "Who was it?"

"I don't know." Harry mumbled under his breath. He pulled back from Paul and ran into the back of the couch. He hugged his legs closer and tried his best to disappear.

"Harry, you're insulting my intelligence again." Harry's head snapped up and he stared at Paul. Paul gave him a look. "You are lying."

"I am not!" Harry denied. He looked away from Paul. He knew it. He had said too much and now he was stuck here with Paul trying to get some answers from him. He really wanted to go back to bed. Just curl up under the blankets and ignore the rest of the world.

“I know you well enough to tell, Harry. I can tell when you’re lying.” Paul said quietly. “Why don’t you want to tell me?” Harry only shook his head in response to Paul’s question. “What are you afraid of, Harry?”

The answer left Harry’s mouth before Harry was even aware of it existing. “That you won’t believe me.” His hand jerked up to his mouth in surprise. Paul gave him an understanding look which helped Harry to relax a bit. He lowered his hand and shook his head in bewilderment. “It’s not even normal in the magical world. How could you understand? You’re a Muggle.”

Paul sat back at Harry’s words. Something big, then. Something big was bothering Harry. Perhaps something along the lines of the visions of Voldemort. “Harry, look at me, please.” Paul said as calmly as he could. Harry’s eyes lifted to meet Paul’s. “I’ll believe you. I’ve learned to expect the unexpected from you. I’m not going to think you’re crazy, or delusional, mental, or anything like that.” He explained. “I do need to know, just in case something like this happens again.” Paul looked Harry over and decided to let Harry think about that before he said anything else..

Harry settled his pillow in front of him and thought about Paul’s words. Paul said that he would believe him. That was a promise, right? He shrugged and sighed. What was the worst that could happen? Locked up like Lockhart for the rest of my life. His brain contradicted him. Paul wouldn’t do that. Harry shook his head. Great. I’m talking to myself and answering back! Barking mad, that’s what I am. “I hope you do believe.” Harry said quietly. “The truth is more fantastic than fiction in this case.”

Paul smiled at Harry. “Before I met you, I only believed in science.” Paul reminded him. “Do your worst.”

Harry gave him a rather evil looking grin. “Would you believe that someone has been living inside one of my books for a couple thousand years? That he possessed me and took me inside my head to train me in wandless magic?”

“Yes.” Paul said after a second.

Harry blinked. “Well, that was easy. Why’d you believe me?”

“The last time you told me something in that way, it not only turned out to be true, but I also got to see some Death Eaters.” Paul smirked. “Besides, Professor Snape mentioned something about a book.” Paul had a thoughtful look on his face. “A book actually possessed you?”

“I’m never normal.” Harry said with a smile. “I’m not sure how it works, though, this book thing.” Harry admitted.

“So, this person who lives in a book, possessed you and took you inside your head to train you in wandless magic?” Paul parroted Harry.

“Yeah, that’s about it.” Harry shrugged. “I’m amazed that you believe me.” Harry looked Paul over.

“I’m going to have trust you.” Paul gave him a smile. “Can you show me something you learned?” Paul watched as Harry shut down a little bit. Harry closed his eyes for a moment and held out his hand. Paul jumped as blue flames appeared on Harry’s hand. He was about to dump the contents of his water bottle over Harry’s hand when Harry’s voice stopped him.

“It isn’t burning me.” Harry said in a monotone. “It is an enchanted flame. It produces light and warmth, but does not burn me.” Harry closed his hand and the flames disappeared. “I’ve got a bit more control on it now.” Harry told him with a giddy smile. “It gives me a bit of a rush, energy-wise.” Paul nodded. Harry lifted some of his mental shields to control his emotions.

Paul relaxed back into his chair and looked Harry over. “So, tell me everything you did. I’m interested in how one is taught wandless magic.” Paul smiled as Harry relaxed into the couch and launched into his latest adventure.

Harry seemed to have enjoyed his time with his “mentor”, as he called Bleys. He told stories of his first “day” with Bleys, laughing at himself for having fallen out of bed. Paul was having a hard time imagining Harry as a small child, especially since Harry always acted so old and said as much. “Oh, no.” Harry told him. “I was adorable as a kid. Bleys said so and all I had to do was look at him to get my way.” Harry confided.

“I’ll make a note of that. ‘Harry: adorable as kid’.” Paul smiled. Harry relaxed into the couch and rested his head on his arm. Paul watched his face for a few seconds. “You’ve remembered something.” He said. Harry looked up and shrugged.

“I guess my emotions show up easier now than before Bleys got a hold of me. He forbade suppression of emotions. I was supposed to express whatever I was feeling at the moment I felt it. It made for a few interesting moments. I was like a roller coaster...up and down, up and down.”

“I happen to agree with him.” Paul said, reaching out to mess up Harry’s hair. He received a glare for his troubles. Never touch a teenage boy’s hair.

“I thought so, too. Well, I did once he explained the reason for it. It makes wandless magic much easier. Emotions become the focus, rather than the wand. You can lose your wand, but emotions are a part of you and no one can take that away.” Harry felt silent and his eyes moved to the candle again. “Bleys did something. I hated him for it, more so when I realized how I thought about him.” Harry shook his head and lowered it to his knees, which had somehow found their way back to his chest.

“You loved him?” Harry’s head snapped up with a look of horror.

“Not in that way!” Harry hastened to assure Paul. The therapist smiled at the typical teenager response Harry had given him.

“I did not mean in that way.” He told Harry with a smile. “How did you feel about him?” He watched as Harry hesitated, obviously wrestling with an answer.

“He...felt,” Harry stopped. He really didn’t want to say this, as it would only bring back pain he didn’t want to remember. “He felt like, a, uh,” He stopped again. “You’re going to think it’s stupid.” He said with a laugh Paul just raised an eyebrow. Harry was stalling and he knew it. “Fine.” Paul smiled. He knew Harry inside out. “He felt like a father. Or what I think a father should feel like, anyway.” Harry admitted and dropped his eyes to his feet. “I told you it was stupid.”

“No.” Paul told him. “It’s not stupid.” He moved forward and tapped Harry on the knee. Harry looked up again. “It’s perfectly normal.” He assured the boy. “I’m guessing that Vernon wasn’t much of a father figure.”

“How did you know that?” Harry demanded. Paul gave Harry a moment to think. “Never mind. You are Paul. You know everything.”

Paul smiled and spread out his hands. “What can I say?” He told the boy. “I’m just that good.” Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. “Now, back to Vernon. What was your relationship like?”

“We didn’t have one.” Harry said honestly. “He yelled. I ducked. That’s about it.”

“That’s it? You ducked? What does that mean?” Paul shot out his questions quickly, hoping he would get at least one answer from Harry.

“Can we talk about something else?” Harry asked, a little uncomfortable with the topic. He really didn’t want to talk about Vernon yet.

“Alright.” Paul cast about for a subject. “You said Bleys did something. What did he do?” Paul watched as Harry’s face went through several emotions. He ranged from hurt to anger and back to

hurt in just a few seconds. Harry pulled his legs up again and rested his head on them. "What is it, Harry?"

"He taught me a lot of stuff about wandless magic. I don't need words, motions, or a wand to do magic anymore. He tried to teach me something and I didn't agree with the method." Harry explained.

"Will you tell me what he did?" Paul asked softly, trying to match Harry's tone. Harry didn't answer. "Harry?"

"He wanted me to learn how to throw off the Cruciatus Curse." Harry looked over at Paul. "The Pain Curse."

"Can you?" Paul asked. "Wizards, I mean." Paul clarified.

"No. No one can block the curse. Or throw it off." Harry told him. "It's not supposed to be possible."

"I hear a 'but' coming." Paul said with a touch of insight. Harry shrugged again and smoothed his hands through his hair. Paul gave him a moment. He knew Harry would continue talking, given enough time to find his words.

"But I can throw it off." Harry said in a rush. "Something else to make me different from everyone else." He sighed and relaxed back against the couch.

"Sounds like a useful skill." Paul commented. "How did he teach you?" Paul almost jumped at the look on Harry's face. Harry had changed in the space of that question.

"He cast it on me!" Harry snarled. "There I was, accepting everything he was teaching me, trailing behind him like a lost puppy, and he was..." Harry stopped. "I was stupid." He finished. "I trusted him. I was stupid, and he got me for it." Harry hit the sofa pillow next to him.

Paul watched Harry for the duration of his rant. Harry had changed, almost overnight. His emotions were no longer hidden under a mask.

He was actually feeling them, not repressing them, and more than that, he was expressing them! Paul almost sank to the floor when he realized exactly who he was talking to: he was talking to Harry. The actual Harry. No masks. No fronts. No personas. Harry. He turned his attention back to Harry. "I think I'm missing something." Paul said slowly. "Why does this particular spell, aside from it being a pain spell, affect you so much?" Paul watched as Harry went rigid. Uh-oh.

"It's not a normal spell. You can say words to some spells and they just happen." Harry explained. "That's how they started at Hogwarts, you know. Easy spells that don't need a lot of intent, just the words. The Cruciatus is different. You need the intent. The spell can't work without it." Harry stopped talking and stared at the couch. "The intent is important. Very few realize that about the Cruciatus. You need to want the person to feel the pain. You need to want to cause the person the worst pain possible." Harry explained.

"I understand now." Paul said as he reached out and put a hand on Harry's knee.

"Yeah." Harry looked at Paul for a second. He was being stupid again and he knew it. He was sixteen years old, for heaven's sake! He shouldn't want a hug like a child! He didn't move, but Paul seemed to sense something. He stood up from his chair and settled on the couch next to Harry. He dropped an arm around the boy's shoulders and tugged. Harry moved the rest of the way and relaxed against the older man. "It hurts." Harry whispered.

"I know." Paul told him, wishing he could have this Bley's character in front of him so that he could avenge Harry's shattered trust. Hermione climbed the stairs to the Headmaster's office. She wasn't sure why she was being called to the office, but she had a feeling it was something to do with Harry. She had a plan, though. The Potter Protectors were standing by with a set of pranks on each floor, along with Sophie's group, the Hogwarts Dramatists' Society. If the group had not heard from her in an hour, Chaos would be set loose inside the halls of Hogwarts. She raised her hand to knock and was surprised to hear the Headmaster greet her before she could knock. "Come in, Hermione." Hermione knew that something was wrong just

by the greeting. He had always called her “Miss Granger”; he hardly ever used Hermione. She opened the door and poked her head around it. Dumbledore looked up from his desk and smiled at her. “Hello, Hermione. Please come in.” Hermione opened the door wider and stepped in.

“You wanted to see me, sir?” She asked.

“Yes, Hermione. Please shut the door.” Hermione pushed the door shut and took the seat Dumbledore pointed out. He held out his candy dish. Hermione thanked him, but shook her head. “I was wondering how things are this year. How are you holding up, with Harry not being here?” Dumbledore rested his head on his hands.

“Um, I’m okay. I miss Harry, but I know that he’ll be okay. He has to be.” She shrugged a little bit and pushed her hair back from her face. “Right?” She asked.

“Harry has had some amazing luck so far. I’m sure he’ll be fine with that luck behind him.” Dumbledore agreed. “Mr. Weasley tells me that you and he do not – what was that phrase he used? – ‘hang around’ like you used to?” Dumbledore said in a speculating voice. “Did you and he get into a fight that I do not know of?” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione shook her head. “No, sir. He was just scaring some first years and I wouldn’t stand for it. He’s not up with them when they have nightmares. I am. I explained that to him and he took offense to it.” She folded her arms and looked out the window. Dumbledore chuckled a little and stroked his beard.

“I’m sure that Mr. Weasley will come around, Hermione, given enough time.” Dumbledore told the girl in a soothing voice. “Mr. Potter, however, presents another problem.” Dumbledore said, his voice turning the slightest bit. Hermione glanced over at him.

“Why is that, sir?” She asked despite herself.

“He is missing, Miss Granger.” Dumbledore stated plainly. “And you know where he is.” Hermione was surprised to find Dumbledore directly in front of her when she turned back around to look at him. Her eyes met his and she felt the oddest sensation behind her eyes. She pulled her wand and incanted a shield spell from the DA.

“I’m sure the Board of Governors would love to hear about this!” Hermione snapped as Dumbledore straightened from his position. “Or how about the Ministry?” She folded her arms and glared her best “mess with me and taste my wrath” glare. “The Daily Prophet would love it!” She summoned her book bag to her and shouldered it. “I realize you’re concerned about Harry, sir, but stay out of my head!” She spun on her heel and started for the door. “Barmy old wizard!” She muttered to herself.

“Miss Granger?” Hermione stopped but didn’t turn around. “Where did you learn about Occlumency and Legillmency?” He asked in a rather curious voice.

“Where else?” Hermione asked in a breezy tone. “A book.” She smirked to herself. Where else would she learn about it? Never mind that the book was only this side of legal.

“That type of book does not exist in Hogwarts library.” Dumbledore commented. Dumbledore jumped as he heard a rather unladylike remark from Hermione just as she wrenched open the door and stomped down the stairs. “Stay out of my mind!” She shouted over her shoulder. The gargoyle shut behind her and Hermione stormed down the hallway. She saw one of the Potter Protectors and nodded to him. “Do it.” She said. “Dumbledore deserves a headache.” She told him with a smile. Ernie Macmillan smiled and took out his Galleon. He tapped it with his wand and Hermione saw the message change. Hermione thanked him and turned away. She needed to calm down.

Harry was sitting at his desk in his room, working on his Muggle homework. He was trying to figure out his Spanish. Why did the pronouns disappear? He was just turning his mind around another twist when his Mini Messenger literally jumped on the desk. He grabbed it and opened it to find a message from Mi.

M: You would never believe what Dumbledore just tried to do!

H: What?

M: Oh, good! You're awake. Are you feeling better? What happened?

H: Nothing I couldn't handle. Tell me what Dumbledore tried to do first.

M: Oh, he just decided to take a little stroll in my head without my permission.

Harry's entire body went cold and dread settled into the pit of his stomach. He couldn't go back to Hogwarts yet. He wasn't ready. The press alone would eat him. Dumbledore would smother him. Snape...he pushed all of the panicked thoughts from his head and turned his attention back to Mi.

H: What?

M: Just what I said. He attempted to use Legillmency on me!

H: What did you do?

M: Protected myself, of course! He didn't get past my first defense. All he got to see was surface thoughts. My annoyance at Ron Weasley, mostly. Some speculation about the world in general. Nothing about you, that's for sure. He was trying, really trying, to get me to think about you. It didn't work.

H: Mi, have I ever told you you're the best sister a guy could have?

M: Not today! Thanks, Skywalker. I wouldn't give up your Degobah to the Empire. Your sanctuary is St. Jude's. Oh, Dad said he dropped your costume off. How's it look?

H: Let me just say that it's my destiny.

M: Corny, Skywalker. Very corny.

H: It's me. The play's almost here.

M: I know.

H: Aunt Petunia's coming.

M: I know.

H: You're still coming, right?

M: Of course I am! You're excited, aren't you?

H: Excited? No. Terrified. Extremely nervous.

M: Good.

H: Good?

M: Well, you are acting completely normal. I would be worried about you if you weren't nervous.

H: I've faced Voldemort and Death Eaters, but I am afraid to get up in front of people and say lines.

M: Oh, the irony. Just remember. You aren't Harry up there. You are Edmund.

H: Yes, that's right. I just hope I keep remembering it.

M: You will. You're going to be a great actor. I can't wait to see the play.

H: I can't wait for you to see the play. The costumes are awesome. We're having a dress rehearsal the day before the first performance. That's the day of the Halloween dance.

M: Did you ask anyone?

H: Yes, I did.

M: Well, don't keep me in suspense. Who?

H: Julie.

M: Happy scream That's great!

H: It's only a "friends" thing. Neither one of us needs a relationship at the moment. Don't get too excited.

M: No worries. Congratulations, Harry. Now, Lord Vader, what are you going to do?

H: Dance. What else?

M: Good thing you know how.

H: Yeah. Note to self: 1,2,3 and 1,2,3 and 1,2,3.

M: It's 3,2,1.

H: blink What?

M: 3,2,1. For the faster music. The numbers are shorter when you go backwards. You don't actually think you're going to be waltzing, did you?

H: I'm not? What am I supposed to do?

M: Just let the music move you. Think of it like martial arts set to music.

H: I'm doomed.

M: laugh No you're not. Just relax and be yourself.

H: Doom. Doom.

M: Harry, stop! You know what I mean.

H: Yeah, I know. cheeky grin I was just making fun.

M: Boys.

H: Girls.

M: Brothers.

H: Sisters.

M: Jedi.

H: Sith.

M: You're going to be injured. Greatly. With a lot of pain.

H: Not if you can't catch me. Even Dumbledore can't catch me.

M: Of course not. Dumbledore can't catch you because he is being outsmarted by his students. There are pranks exploding all over Hogwarts at this very moment. Poor Headmaster is running around trying to banish them all, only to find his work undone when he gets to his first starting point.

H: The twins must be making a lot of money this year.

M: Yes. The group dedicated to protecting you from the Headmaster has made many orders from them. I only hope they can keep up with the demand.

H: It's Gred and Forge. I'm sure they can.

M: True. Oh, drat. I have to go. One of the group is in trouble and we need to make a distraction. I want pictures of you in your costume!

H: No promises, but Paul may fulfill your demands.

M: Thanks. Bye.

H: Later.

Harry shook his head as he shut his book. Who knew Hermione would turn into such a good rule-breaker? He wondered how long the corruption would last. More importantly, how would she feel about a portable swamp set up in the Divination tower? He fell to pondering the likelihood of sneaking one up there. He had only a second to register a terrible pain in his scar before he slumped to his desk.

Author's Note: Right. Barricading the door against you lot. I'm sorry I left a cliffhanger. It just came out that way. What could Voldemort possibly want with Harry?

A/N: Here we go again!

“Give me some warning next time!” Harry snarled as he got to his feet and faced Voldemort. “I could have been in a crowded room full of Muggles when you did that! You know how they panic!” He stood facing the other wizard, chest heaving up and down in anger and fury. Paul would go frantic if he had just seen Harry literally pass out like he had. Paul went frantic over many things, now that Harry thought about it, but this would be a justified frantic.

“Oh, did I make the little Gryffindor upset?” Voldemort mocked Harry with one hand held to his mouth, as though he was concerned for Harry. “Stomp on his precious little well being around the Muggles?” Voldemort let out a bark of laughter as a target appeared. “Well, what are you waiting for?” He asked Harry in a curious voice. “Wand out and hit the target.”

Harry felt his magic gather behind his eyes and he fought it down to avoid giving away his secret. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his wand. It felt dead in his hands. He had felt magic, true magic, not this...farce. He set his body in the stance Voldemort had lashed into him and raised his wand at the target. His magic spiked again and he fought it down faster than before. He let a small bit travel through his wand as he said the disarming spell. The target glowed an eerie yellow color and took a few minutes to fade away. Voldemort had stepped behind Harry and leaned down to speak into his ear. “Very good, my child.” Oh, so now he was a child! “Very good. You are learning so much. Your progress is satisfactory.” That was it? Satisfactory? Harry wanted to hit himself. He should be thankful that he was escaping without a curse. “How is life with the Muggles?” Voldemort asked, switching topics abruptly as he was wont to do.

“Horrid.” Harry snapped. He was angry and he was going to take it out on someone. “They’re oh-so-concerned about me and don’t know when to leave me alone.” He sneered. “As though they could possibly understand anything about me.” He scoffed. “No matter how many times I tell them to leave me alone, they just keep coming back...for my own good, of course.” Harry felt his magic spike again and a little stab of worry nudged at his brain. Why was his magic spiking like

that? “No, they’ve got to take care of the ‘frail little boy’.” Harry performed a sneer of which Severus Snape could be proud and tightened his hands into fists. “They don’t see.” He told Voldemort as his breathing grew harsh and staggered. “They don’t see that I’m not frail.” His face changed into a look of disgust as he shook his head. “They don’t see that I am-“ He shook his head and tried to bring his breathing back into a normal pattern. “They don’t see-“

Voldemort cut him off with a rather odd look. “They do not see how powerful you have become.” Voldemort said with a dark pride shining in his eyes. “How much more powerful you will become given enough time and practice.” He circled Harry as Harry tried to fight his emotions back to the point of control. “How superior you are compared to them.” He stepped forward slowly, allowing Harry to watch his every movement, treating the boy as Hagrid would treat one of his injured creatures. “How special you are to those who can appreciate your power and abilities.” Harry stared into the man’s eyes as Voldemort reached up and caressed his cheek in the exact manner a father would do to his son. As Bleyes had done to him on more than one occasion.

Harry had no idea how long he and Voldemort stood there, Harry’s eyes locked onto the other wizards. He felt...safe. This was Voldemort! He shouldn’t feel safe. He should be running in the opposite direction as fast as his feet could carry him. Voldemort brushed a hand over Harry’s hair and Harry came back to himself with a jerk. He pulled away from Voldemort and looked the man over. Voldemort allowed it and only nodded. “Only I can appreciate what you will become, Harry.” Voldemort told him. “I can practically feel your magic pouring off of you, fueled by your anger. Do you really think Dumbledore could teach you how to apply that?” Voldemort turned and walked a bit away from Harry, allowing the boy to ruminate over the idea for himself. “Only I can make you become who you truly are.” He approached Harry again and noticed the turmoil in Harry’s eyes. “My confused dark child. Raised in the light but never understanding where all his power originated and how best to use it.” Voldemort reached out and tapped Harry’s scar. “It originates there.” Voldemort told him. The older wizard paced away and shrugged. “You will come to understand in time, my child.” Voldemort told him

as he waved his wand. "Only in time will you understand your destiny."

Harry felt the sleep spell settle around him and he closed his eyes with a still pensive expression on his face. Why did he feel that Voldemort was telling the truth? More importantly, what did it all mean? He jerked awake at his desk and sat up. One hand flew to his scar while the other covered his mouth. He wanted to be sick. He rubbed at the scar instinctually, only to stop when he felt no pain from it at all. His eyes grew wide when he realized that he had not felt pain in it at all during this last encounter. Oh, Merlin. He was going dark. He was turning into a Death Eater! No, worse. It was much worse. He was turning into Voldemort's second, just as the older wizard wanted. His stomach performed several acrobatic feats and he pushed back from his desk and stumbled into his bathroom. He fell to his knees in front of the toilet and emptied his body of everything he had eaten that day. His stomach tried to get rid of everything from the past week, but found itself empty. That didn't stop the dry heaves from coming, leaving Harry gasping for air. He collapsed backwards onto the floor and tried to catch his breath. He couldn't be turning dark. He couldn't be. Tears leaked out from his eyes as Harry fought to control his breathing. He couldn't get enough air. He managed to move a shaking hand and pulled at his collar. Why couldn't he breathe?

"007?" He heard Jack in his bedroom. It was time for evening meds! Jack always checked with Harry to see if he wanted sleeping pills, which he was allowed to have if he needed them. He hadn't had any in a long time. Jack could help him! "Where are you, kid?" Harry gave a half-hearted kick at the door, but the slight bump he gave it was enough for Jack to open it and peer around it. "Evan?" Jack entered the bathroom and dropped to a knee next to Harry. "Just breathe." Jack said, pulling Harry's hand away from his collar. "Breathe to my count, okay? You're going to be okay. It's just a panic attack." Jack counted while Harry fought with his breathing. So, this was a panic attack. Paul had talked about them before, and Harry knew he had felt like he couldn't get enough air in the past, but he had never really connected the two before. "1,2,3, in." Harry followed the instructions and let out the breath when told.

“Paul.” Oh, he sounded pitiful! Just pitiful. Jack whipped out his walkie talkie and said something to whoever was on the other end. “Hurts.” He reached up to touch his throat again, but Jack stopped his hand. Why was he shaking? He just wanted it to stop!

“I know, buddy. You’re having a hard time breathing, and that always hurts.” Jack pulled Harry into a sitting position and leaned Harry against the wall. “Just remember, 1,2,3 in and 1,2,3 out.” Harry could have sworn it was 3,2,1. Was he confused? Harry continued to follow Jack’s instructions. He jerked in surprise as Paul suddenly appeared in front of him. When did he get there? He held out his arms to Paul and hoped the man could figure out the rest. He didn’t have the air to explain what he wanted. Pathetic. Truly pathetic. Begging to be held like a three year old. I, Harry Potter, am PATHETIC. Paul reached out and pulled Harry into his arms. Jack stood and left the room, muttering something about tea.

“You’re okay, Harry. You’re safe here. I’ve got you.” Harry’s hands fisted in Paul’s jacket and he hid his face against Paul’s shoulder. So he was pathetic. Harry just couldn’t care at that point. He listened as Paul whispered a lot of soothing words to Harry, each focusing on the theme that Harry was safe and that Paul was there. Harry felt his breathing coming back to normal and sighed.

“Am I a dark wizard?” Harry whispered to Paul. Paul cocked an eyebrow and looked down at the top of Harry’s head. “Am I turning dark?”

“What makes you think that?” Paul asked softly as he reached up a hand and smoothed Harry’s hair back.

“Am I?” Harry repeated. “Am I a dark wizard?” Harry took another deep breath and shuddered. “Am I evil?” His breath hitched and he started counting in his mind as he breathed.

“Just the fact that you are worried about it is enough to indicate that you are not.” Paul told him sternly. “You are one of the most selfless people I know, Harry. You care for many people and love them deeply. Does that sound like a dark wizard to you?” Harry shook his

head against Paul's shoulder. "No more talk about you becoming a dark wizard." Paul told him gently. He rested a hand on Harry's forehead and Harry leaned into the cool touch. "You are burning up!" Paul said in a shocked voice. "Why didn't you tell someone you were ill?" Paul asked.

"Am I?" Harry asked. He didn't remember feeling sick or out of sorts. One minute, he was thinking about Voldemort, and the next he couldn't breathe. He had got sick, but that didn't mean he was ill.

"Burning up." Paul stood and carried Harry with him. "You are getting tall and heavy, Harry."

"Bout time." Harry commented as he leaned against Paul. "I hate being short." Harry paused as he gathered his thoughts. "And scrawny. Hate being scrawny." He commented in a serious tone. He groaned as the room tilted sideways. He could have sworn that this room was three feet in the opposite direction. He had felt fine. Why did he feel so bad now? Mmm, bed. Bed sounded great. Paul lowered Harry onto his bed as Jack returned with tea.

"He's ill. Running a fever." Paul told Jack. "Could you call Dr. Lansky up here, please?" Paul accepted the tea and watched as Jack disappeared. He immediately thanked whatever power there was in the universe for those who chose nursing as their profession. Jack was invaluable.

"Hey, Paul." Harry whispered. He motioned Paul closer. Paul bent down to hear Harry's not so quiet whisper. "Voldemort earned a point tonight." Paul turned his head to look at Harry. Voldemort? Had this been a vision? What was this about points? "How fast do you think we could run away from the doctor?" Harry asked as he curled up on his blankets. "I hate the hospital wing." Harry confided. "It's too white." Paul smiled and ran a fond hand through Harry's hair. Normal kid there. "Madame Pomfrey has reserved a bed for me. No one else uses it. It's all mine." Harry told him.

"You're well on your way to earning that here, kiddo." Paul told him as he moved away and found where Harry kept his night clothes. "Do

you think you can change by yourself?" He asked. Harry nodded and took the pajamas. He started down at them as though he had never seen them before. Paul left the room to wait for the doctor.

Harry changed and crawled into his bed. He knew he should be concerned. He was not feeling well and he should be resting, but he was really worried that Sensei was going to be disappointed in him. They had a training session first thing in the morning. Harry pulled up the covers and closed his eyes. Maybe Sensei would take it easy on him. Harry stopped and thought about it. Maybe not. "Sensei" and "easy" did not belong in the same sentence. Or the same thought pattern. Harry threw out a hand and called his book bag to him. He could read if he was going to be in bed.

He pulled out his science textbook and flipped it open to the chapter he needed to read. He dropped it when someone knocked on the door. "Come in." Harry had forgotten that Paul was waiting outside.

"Hey, buddy. Dr. Lansky is here to check you out." Harry nodded and set the book aside.

"You and I are seeing a lot of each other." Dr. Lansky said as he pulled Harry's desk chair up to the bed.

"Not by my choice." Harry said with a sigh.

"True. Paul said that you vomited?" Dr. Lansky said as he opened his bag and took out a tongue depressor.

Harry winced. He should have flushed the toilet before Paul got there. Oh, right. He had forgotten how to breathe. "Yes, sir." He answered. Might as well be truthful.

"Tongue out, say 'ah'." Dr. Lansky said as he examined Harry's throat. "Mmm, now what made you vomit? Were you feeling nauseated?"

Harry had to wait until the man removed the tongue depressor before he could answer. "Only right before." He shrugged. He hated those little wooden sticks!

"Mm-hmm." Dr. Lansky took out an ear thermometer and motioned for Harry to turn his head. Harry had been fascinated by this thermometer when he had first seen it and had asked the doctor to do it several times. Put something in an ear and get a temperature! He loved it and wondered if he could modify one for Pomfrey, just for his amusement. He could hear the purebloods' panicked screams now. "You're a little warm. Nothing to be concerned about."

"Do I have to go back in the infirmary?" Harry asked in the most pitiful voice he could muster. He noticed Paul smothering his laughter in the background.

Dr. Lansky looked his patient over and smiled at him. "I don't think so." Harry almost collapsed on the bed in relief. "Your fever is not too high. So long as the night nurse is willing to check on you during the night," Dr. Lansky turned and looked at Jack, who smiled and nodded, "then I see no problem with you staying here."

"Thank you." Harry said gratefully. "No offense meant. I just got out and I didn't want to go back." He told the doctor.

Dr. Lansky wrote down a few things on the now familiar file and nodded. "I understand. If you start feeling worse, tell Jack or one of the other night nurses. Tell somebody. The last thing we want is you to get worse and miss the dance or the play."

"I will tell someone the instant I feel worse." Harry promised. He was afraid of what Professor Bevington would do if Harry happened to miss the play. Death would be an option. Or a tantrum on the teacher's part. Harry had found that the drama teacher was a bit...dramatic. The teacher had what he called "attacks". His female students called them "drama queen moments". Harry called them weird and just backed away from the man. He did not want to be in the man's vicinity when he voice grew tight and squeaky.

“Good.” The doctor’s voice broke Harry out of his thoughts on the wonders of Professor Bevington’s attacks. Dr. Lansky finished his examination and smiled at Harry. “I have an idea that you will be feeling better in the morning.” He told Harry. “Take these” He held out two pills, “for your fever, and I’ll check on you in the morning if I haven’t heard about you beforehand.”

“Thank you.” Harry swallowed the two pills and smiled at Paul. Dr. Lansky left and Paul watched as Harry settled back with his textbook.

“Forget it, kiddo.” Paul said as he took Harry’s books from him. “You are going to rest. That means sleep.” Paul sat in the chair Dr. Lansky just left and smiled. “Have you meditated?”

“Not yet.” Harry answered. Paul gave him a look that said he should. Harry rolled his eyes, but closed them and settled his breathing. He hoped that he would not have to worry about panic attacks again. This one, now that he knew what to call it, was frightening. One at the wrong time could spell disaster later. He drifted off to sleep just a few minutes later, thinking of the Halloween dance. He smirked to himself as he realized that he did not miss the idea of a Halloween Feast. Floating pumpkins were okay, but he was going to be Darth Vader. Harry did recover by the next morning without a sign that he had felt poorly at all. The rest of the week passed quickly for him and his friends as they all perfected their costumes for the dance. Harry and Bug had ended up with Sensei for dancing lessons (Harry could waltz, but that was the extent of his dancing, much to his chagrin). Sensei had been patient and told them that dancing was like fighting, without the physical contact of hitting others. Harry could only shake his head, but an hour with Sensei had given him enough to relax and move with the music. Rick had helped by acting as hopeless as possible when it came to the dance floor, leaving both Harry and Bug collapsed in laughter on the floor. Sensei had only muttered about some skills that were unable to be taught for those who had no natural talent.

Harry had shown Paul his costume. Paul could only respond with a “Lord Vader” in the most serious voice Harry had heard from him. Harry did not like the “lord” part of it, but he accepted it. He guessed

he could carry the costume and could not wait to go to the dance, so long as Julie showed up. He did not want to be “unattached” at the dance. Julie was his shield against everyone else. He only hoped that she saw it that way too.

The first dress rehearsal had been an eye-opening experience for Harry. They had a regular rehearsal many times, but the dress rehearsal was the real thing. They all had to be ready for their opening night. Harry had found himself ambushed by the costuming crew the week before as a model as to how one should move with a cloak wrapped around his shoulders. Even Professor Bevington had said that Harry looked like a natural. Oh, if only the kids at Hogwarts could see Harry Potter as a natural in a cloak. He had not felt comfortable in his robes until well into his first year. Christmas had only messed with his comfort level with his robes. He only began to feel comfortable again just after Easter. Needless to say, he preferred the Muggle clothing he had all his life.

Dress rehearsal was run real speed from the moment they all entered the theater. They were bundled into costumes while the crew dashed about to make everything ready. Harry had only a few seconds peace before several of the costume crew had called the actors for makeup help. Harry did not like makeup at all. He and the other actors had practiced with it several times, but Harry could still not draw a straight line under his eye. Bug hovered with a camera and took video of them changing into their costumes and putting on their makeup. His commentary was funnier than the images. He had caught Harry with eye liner and came up as close as possible to him. “Evan, line master!” The announcement caused Harry to draw a rather funny looking line under his eye. Harry had turned and threatened Bug’s life if he didn’t remove the camera. Bug had disappeared quicker than Lockhart’s bravado when faced with a real challenge.

“Five minutes!” The call came through the backstage area. Harry finished with his powder and checked himself in the mirror. He didn’t miss anything, did he? The powder was light, because they wanted him pale. He looked different from everyone else, who actually had fleshy tones to their makeup. Professor Bevington had explained that the villain was always outlined in some way or another and facial hair

would only look “silly” and “cliché” for the villain. Harry jumped as Julie dashed in the doorway.

“Let me look at you!” She snapped. The energy backstage was almost like fire, and spreading just as rapidly. Harry felt it himself and had a hard time standing still. She studied his face and adjusted a lamp. “Stay still.” She ordered as she grabbed the sponge. She added a bit more make up to his forehead before nodding to herself. She grabbed some lip color and used her finger to apply it to Harry’s lips. “Whatever you do, do NOT lick your lips!” She sighed and patted some loose powder to keep the color on. She brushed some color on his checks and motioned for Harry to look at himself. Harry turned and nearly stepped back from the mirror. The change was subtle, but it was there. He was no longer Harry, or even Evan, but Edmund, the bastard son. He practiced a Draco Malfoy smirk and smiled at Julie when she clapped. “Alright, cloak on and get out there! Bevie is having a bit of an attack.”

“Bevie” was the nickname of their drama teacher, and Bevie having an attack was a common occurrence, almost as common as Paul going frantic, but the idea was enough to cause Harry to pick up his cloak, swing it about his head to rest on his shoulders, and stride out of the room at a clipped walk. He felt his character slip onto him as he took his place, ready for the opening curtain. He felt calm standing there with none of the nervous energy that had filled him moments before. He didn’t need nerves. Edmund had no nerves.

Three hours later found them all collapsed back stage. Harry and his “brother” had managed to find each other and congratulate each other on a nice bit of sword fighting before throwing themselves on a convenient sofa. Bevington had come back stage and congratulated them all on giving him several heart attacks. “Things go wrong in rehearsals. That’s okay. There’s a saying that if you have a bad dress rehearsal, the opening night will be perfect. Just remember that my heart is not as strong as it once was. Whatever you do, no one get hurt or sick in the next twenty-four hours. Got it?” He glared around the group as though trying to intimidate them all into perfect health. “Good. Now, everyone have fun this evening at the dance and I’ll see you all here at two o’clock tomorrow.” Harry and the entire crew leapt

to their feet to go get ready for the dance. Or in Harry's case, wash off the makeup that was driving him barmy. Several other experienced students told him he would forget about it after a while, but Harry found it doubtful. Makeup itched!

Harry stepped out of his bathroom to find Paul waiting for him. Harry smiled at the man and pulled on his boots for his Darth Vader costume. He and Paul had a few sessions since Harry's panic attack and talked a great deal about what made a person "evil", but Harry had managed to avoid the questioning about Voldemort's point. Lord Snakeface had managed to score. He had scared Harry enough to make Harry doubt his own motivations. That was a well-deserved point and Harry would give it to him. Not that he knew Harry was keeping score. Harry did it to remind himself of things.

"You nervous?" Paul asked as Harry pulled Darth Vader's helmet on.

"Why would I be nervous?" Harry questioned as he fixed the clasps. "It's just a dance. I've been to one before." Harry explained.

"You're going with a girl." Paul explained.

"Just friends." Harry reminded Paul. "We're not going to be romantically involved anytime soon, Paul. Keep dreaming."

"I'm hurt, Harry. Really hurt." Paul watched as Harry fastened Darth Vader's cloak around his shoulders. "You look very intimidating." He told the boy.

"That's the idea." Harry said with a chuckle.

"Good. Get going. I'm sure Julie is waiting." Harry squared his shoulders and left his room, Paul tagging along behind. Every adult was chaperoning the dance and Harry had a feeling that more pictures of students were going to be displayed in the next week or so. Cameras were everywhere, taking pictures of the students as they paired off to dance. Well, at least his face was covered.

Harry hovered next to the door of the auditorium, waiting for Julie and laughing to himself when the other students skirted around him in a semi fascinated, yet terrified fashion. He did not ruin the persona of Lord Vader. He only folded his arms and glared at the crowd through the mask. They couldn't see it, of course, but he felt it working. Or, he hoped it worked.

"Hi, Evan!" Harry turned and found Julie dressed as a very convincing fairy, complete with wings and silver pixie dust sprinkled in her hair.

"How did you know it was me?" He asked as she hugged him. What was with girls and hugging? Not that Harry was complaining. Girls hugged him all the time. He couldn't understand why.

"Your costume is a bit obvious." She said with a smirk. "It fits you, for some reason." She shrugged. "I can't explain it. I mean, you're playing a villain, and you play a good villain, but you are also the same person who taught Bug how to dance, helped Missy with her lines, and coached Allen to become a true swordfighter. You just can't hide your real nature once you are off the stage."

"Shh. Don't give away my secret. Even walls have ears." Harry told her with a finger raised to the mask where his lips should be. "You look great." Harry told her, trying to change the subject. He never really felt all that comfortable discussing himself.

"Thank you. You ready?" She asked as she took his offered arm.

"Yes, I am." Harry led the way into the auditorium. The time passed quickly. The next time he looked up an hour had passed and he had danced for the entire time, sometimes with Julie and sometimes not. Some songs he just could not dance with a partner. Too fast and it was more fun in a group. They had just finished just such a song when Harry heard a welcome voice.

“Hi Skywalker!” Hermione’s voice said at his right elbow. Harry turned and saw his best friend standing there with a huge smile on her face.

“Mi!” Harry hugged her. Okay, he understood the hugging thing now. That many girls were overjoyed to see him? Wow. Ron would be so jealous.

“Happy Halloween.” She told him. “You are looking particularly evil this evening.” She told him as she stepped back and looked his costume over. “Dad warned me about Darth Vader and just happened to slip this one to me.” She said, twirling around.

“You make a stunning Princess Leia. Mi, what are you doing here?” Harry asked, too happy to continue that question.

“ Well, the manipulative one is quite busy with some rather enthusiastic Halloween pranks that somehow managed to get into the food for the Halloween Feast. Something about the entire student body turning into human-sized canaries. Except me and my escort this evening.” She nodded her head to a corner of the room. Sensei stood there with some people. One of the people turned and Harry nearly fell over in shock.

“Did I just see what I thought I saw?” He demanded of his friend. Hermione checked her hair (wrapped in Princess Leia style buns) and smiled.

“You did.” She told him.

Harry turned back and stared. Snape stood next to Sensei dressed in a rather opulent outfit complete with cape. He looked...decadent, if that was possible. Harry jerked as he watched the man laugh at something Sensei had said. Snape was capable of laughter? And smiling? Harry noticed the long canines and Snape’s costume became clear. He only hoped that the glass full of the red liquid was some of the punch offered at the refreshment table.

“Snape escorted you here?” Harry asked Hermione in a squeak. That was just...wrong. Snape was old enough to be her father.

“Of course not!” She told him with a laugh and roll of her eyes. “He’s the chaperone. A pureblood thing I don’t understand.” She smiled and laughed at Harry’s folded arms. “I wanted to come, but the rest of the PPs didn’t want me coming alone, so one of them came with me, and Snape came along so we would be ‘safe from temptation’. It’s practically a Victorian way of thinking.” Hermione explained patiently.

“So who is it?” Harry asked, ready to jump on a chair if that would help his search.

“It’s me.” Harry closed his eyes behind his mask and turned around. Draco Malfoy stood there dressed as Han Solo with a blaster at his side. Harry looked him over and shook his head. Draco Malfoy could pull off “scruffy-looking”. “Surprised?” Draco asked with a smirk.

“Mi, you’ve gone to the Dark Side.” Harry said mournfully.

“We’re not dating!” Hermione snapped as she looked back and forth between the two boys. “Don’t even think about it. Know-it-alls and no-good-smugglers do NOT belong together.” She told them. Both boys laughed at that idea. Hermione made her point.

“Here you are!” Julie said as she came up beside Harry. “It’s hot on that dance floor.” She fanned herself with one hand before noticing Hermione and Draco. “Oh, sorry! You’re friends of Evan, aren’t you?” She asked with a bright smile. Harry thanked his lucky stars that Draco did not bother correcting the girl on Harry’s name. “Hermione, right?” She asked.

“That’s right, Julie. Nice to see you again.” Hermione told her. “This is my friend Drake. He goes to the same school I do.” She said in a bored tone.

Julie looked Draco over before offering her hand. Draco took it and bowed over it, just as he had done to Hermione at the beginning of the year. The music started up again. “Would you care to dance?” He

asked Julie with his most polite voice. Julie accepted eagerly and allowed Draco to lead her to the dance floor.

“Oh, Harry!” Hermione whispered. “They’re so cute!” She squealed as Draco reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind Julie’s ear. “The Pureblood Prince and the Muggle. It sounds like a fairytale.” She said with a happy little smile. “He deserves someone nice.”

“Mi, you’re turning my stomach.” Harry told her. “I can’t see it.” Harry stopped and looked at Julie’s face as Draco spun her around in a rather daring interpretation of some kind of classical dance that just shouldn’t fit to modern music, but he somehow managed it. “Or maybe I can.” Harry looked across at Snape and noticed the man’s look. Oh, great. The man saw it too. Harry didn’t know if that was a good or bad thing.

“He seems quite taken with her.” Hermione said, pulling Harry onto the dance floor. “Let’s dance.”

“I only hope he knows that she is a Muggle.” Harry said as he followed Hermione’s steps.

“Drake is not stupid.” She told Harry. Harry smirked as he caught Draco Malfoy laughing at something Julie had just said. He wouldn’t push the issue. She was having fun without stress. He was happy for her. “You excited about the play tomorrow?” Hermione asked.

“Excited?” Harry asked. “A little.” Harry proceeded to describe his feelings about his role and Professor Bevington’s “attacks” to Hermione. She laughed, just as Harry wanted. He didn’t really know what to think about tomorrow. Everyone expected some kind of strong feelings, but Harry could only shrug. There were no strong feelings. He felt more comfortable saying lines than he did speaking in class. On stage was like flying in the Muggle world. Why couldn’t anyone else understand that?

A/N: Next chapter – The play! Thanks to all who reviewed. I’m glad you enjoyed it and hope this is sufficient to hold you over until the next.

Author's Note: There are now forums, for those of you who have burning questions about the story, plot, etc. Just click on my author's name to get to them. There's one for each of my stories. Also, this chapter is dedicated to Centaurs and her exploding head. Sorry about this taking so long. FFN wouldn't work for some reason.

"You do realize that...girl is a Muggle." Snape said as he transfigured his teeth back into the appropriate shape. He stood from his chair and went over to the mirror to make sure his teeth were no longer fangs. He enjoyed scaring students, yes, but he did not want to have to deal with a Hufflepuff fainting in his class. He nodded to himself and returned to his chair. He ignored the red and gold firework bouncing around in the far corner of his living room. How they managed to get a firework in his quarters...well, they were lucky he could not give them detention for it...yet.

"Of course, Severus." Draco said from his reclined position on the couch. "That's what I like about her." Snape sat up and glared at his charge. Draco Malfoy? Liking a Muggle?

"Who are you?" Snape demanded. "And what have you done with Draco?" he was tempted to draw his wand, but he wanted to allow Draco a chance to explain...if he could.

"Relax, Severus." Draco held up his hands in a placatory gesture. "I'm me." Draco cringed at that sentence. His mother would have hit him if she heard that.

"Then explain why Draco Malfoy, Prince of Slytherin, likes a Muggle, for being a Muggle?" Snape said with a hiss.

"I do not see why you're so upset about it." Draco answered in a calm tone as he propped up his feet on the coffee table. "You don't have to marry her."

Snape felt his heart leapt into his throat and start a merry little jig. Oh dear, Merlin, no.

“Marriage?” Snape spat, sweeping over to Draco in a barely controlled rage. He knocked the boy’s feet from the table. Draco’s respect for furniture seemed to have diminished overnight. “You cannot marry her. You are only sixteen.”

Draco seemed unperturbed by Snape’s advance and gave him a blithe smile. “Malfoys always know who they want to marry early.” He informed his mentor with a shrug. “My father picked my mother when he was fourteen.” Draco explained with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“And we both know how well that worked out.” Snape snarled and he swept away from Draco and over to his mirror again. He was aiming for the stand beneath it and what rested on that stand. He needed something to take away the foul taste in his mouth that came from his heart dancing in his throat.

“The difference between my father and I is that he wanted a show piece and I want a wife. No, more than that, I want a companion. Someone who loves me for who I am and not what my family has, or what my family wanted me to be. I want to make her happy, see that smile everyday when I wake up, show her real fairies. Love her.” Draco trailed off into silent contemplation while Snape stared at him in horror, aghast at the words Draco was saying.

“Are you listening to yourself?” Snape rasped out around his heart dancing in his throat. “You’re infatuated...or confounded.” Snape’s knees suddenly felt weak. Why in the world was he able to face the Dark Lord without a flinch, and yet, he could not manage to stand when the child he considered his son started talking about love, marriage, and pretty butterflies? Snape lowered his glass and dropped into a handy chair. “I am not sure which is worse.” He raised a hand to the bridge of his nose and pinched it. He could feel a stupendous headache starting there and it was named “Draco”.

“Neither, sir. I am neither infatuated nor confounded. I have felt both, and before you ask, I’m not going to tell you who.” Snape lowered himself further into his chair. The brat beat him to it.

Draco's hand reached up and a light finger traveled down his scar before he dropped his hand back into his lap. "She doesn't know that I am the Slytherin Prince or whatever title people give me. She doesn't know about my father and what he has done. She only knows Drake. And she likes Drake."

Snape wanted to shake the boy until his teeth rattled in his skull. The boy was too young! "You are a boy. You are too young to think about marriage, much less start speaking of it in concrete terms. You have a place here, and I will not see you throw it away."

"I have a place here?" Draco latched onto the word and like an annoying yippy dog, would not release it. "A place?" Snape could read the suspicion in his eyes as he sat up and faced his mentor. Snape realized that this was not how he wanted to tell the boy, but it was too late now. He blamed the punch from the dance. Sugar was influencing his thought patterns. "Please, sir. By all means, tell me about my place here and how you've been planning my life behind my back!" Draco jumped to his feet and paced a bit beside the sitting area.

Snape allowed the boy to seethe for a few minutes. This kind of behavior was something he expected from Gryffindors. Well, the boy was upset, but some decorum would have been welcome. Well, time to end the ranting and reassert reason in the boy's mind. "What do you see when you look at this wall?" Snape asked as he gestured to the wall.

Draco stopped in his pacing and looked at Snape. His expression told Snape that he thought his mentor had gone a bit mad. "A wall. A door. A torch. A hideous painting that only the headmaster could have chosen." Well, a point to Slytherin. The headmaster had chosen that particular painting for Snape's quarters.

"What does Minerva McGonagall see when she looks at that wall?" Snape asked next. Draco gave him another "you've gone mad" look before he shrugged.

“Same as I do.” Snape wanted to roll his eyes. One night among Muggles and Draco’s grammatical skills had descended to a first year level. “Where are you going with this?” Draco demanded of Snape.

“Minerva McGonagall does not see a door. Albus wants me to center that painting of his. Flitwick is unaware of the door as well.” He watched Draco puzzle it together. “Sit down, son.” He told Draco. “I have a few things to tell you.”

He stood, poured out another drink, and handed it to Draco. He and Albus had fought over the alcohol issue more than once. Albus thought the boy was too young to drink, but the offer of an adult drink served more than one function in their relationship. It acknowledged that Draco was an “adult” in Snape’s eyes, at least capable of making adult decisions without a large amount of guidance. Its second purpose filled a more Slytherin application. Draco, while used to alcoholic beverages of a light nature (champagne at his parents’ parties, for instance), was unaccustomed to the harder drinks Snape enjoyed. The alcohol lowered his inhibitions the slightest bit without affecting too much of his reason. It helped to buffer many of their discussions about the abuse Draco had suffered at the hands of his father in the past. He knew that Draco was a Slytherin and would not have faced his problems without some cushioning against feelings he was not used to displaying. Not the healthiest option, true, but it was the only one Draco had allowed when he and Snape had started talking about Draco’s home life.

Draco took a sip of his drink and set it aside. “What do you have to tell me?” Snape looked at the boy’s determined face and sighed. He hoped Draco was ready for this. Snape had hid from his own Head of House for three days when the man told him. Not that he was being cowardly. Nothing of the sort. He had just....waited for the best moment to express his rage at having his life ordered by something he could not control. Snape wondered if he should spell all of his glassware against breaking. Draco might be unpredictable.

“Salazar Slytherin left many enchantments in place when he left Hogwarts. Some of them include the staircases and a few portraits. Most of them involve the Head of House quarters and the passages

connected to that door.” Snape pointed at the door. Draco looked at the door and shrugged.

“Slytherin valued every one of his students and spent a lot of time with them after hours in the dormitory, tutoring the struggling students and mentoring the confused. He wanted such work to continue once he was gone. He created a spell with a method lost to us today that chooses the next Head of House so that his work with his students could continue. The enchantments work much like the Sorting Hat, but they are more in depth. They do not just see potential, but reality of how a person thinks and what they will do and why they do it.”

“Are you saying that this Sorting enchantment has chosen me in some way?” Draco demanded as he put everything together.

“Yes.” Snape’s answer was simple and direct. “That is exactly what I am saying.” He elaborated. “The enchantments would not have allowed you to use the passages, much less see the door if you were not Head of House material.” Snape sat back in his chair and sipped at his own drink. Draco would react in just a few seconds.

“What if I don’t want it?” Draco asked. “What if I want to marry a Muggle and become something mundane?”

“You would be bored. You know it; I know it.” Draco shook his head and sighed lightly. “You have a place and future here, Draco. A career is waiting for you upon completion of your education. You just have to choose the subject you wish to teach.”

“You already have it.” Draco said. “There, can’t take a position that is filled.” He said with a triumphant smirk.

“Albus will have to hire a competent DADA teacher sooner or later...I plan to be ready for that date.” Snape gave Draco one of his own triumphant smirks back. Two could play this game.

“I don’t want this.” Draco said.

“Neither did I.” Snape agreed. “I thought it was the worst fate that could have possibly fallen for me. Instead, it’s turned out to be a sort of blessing.” Snape mused. Why had he not realized that before?

“I thought you hated teaching?” Draco asked.

“No. I love teaching gifted students. It’s the ones who have no passion for my subject or endanger other students that make me want to hex every child I see.” Snape said with a rather pensive expression. “There are students that make you wonder which ancient god you angered to ever be cursed with them.”

“Longbottom.” Draco said in an understanding tone.

“I’ve had worse.” Snape told the boy. Draco gave him a disbelieving look. “Then, there are the students that make you wonder what you did right. The brilliant ones who seem to know, instinctively, what you mean and are able to answer back in the same language. They bring such natural skill to the art and improve upon it, almost subconsciously, without worrying about petty things in their work that do not need worried over.”

“You sound like you’ve had one of those.” Draco said with a faint question in his voice.

“Two in life.” Snape said. “One, oh, some years ago. And you.” Snape fell quiet and watched Draco. The boy was thinking rather deeply and Severus did want to disturb him. At least he wasn’t raging and throwing things about the room. Snape would not have been surprised if that had happened. The feeling of being, well, trapped, would equate with Snape’s own feelings when his Head of House told him all those years ago.

“I need to take a walk.” Draco said suddenly as he rose from the couch. He stopped and looked down at his clothing. “After I change.” Draco left the sitting room and entered his bedroom to change.

Snape smirked. Yes, this 'Han Solo' character would be a little difficult to pass off as a student of Hogwarts. Draco reemerged a few minutes later in normal clothing. "I'll be back later." He told Snape.

"Take your time. I can give you a hall pass to be out after curfew, if you want it." Snape told the boy.

"No need." Draco held up a gold badge with a "P" on it. "This is good for something." Draco disappeared out the door in the next instant, making Snape wonder what Potter would do with just such a badge. He shuddered to even put his mind to the possibilities.

"The possibilities are endless." Julie said as joined him at the mirror.

"You like Drake?" Draco Malfoy and a Muggle. He fought down a shudder and wondered what had happened to the universe he knew and loved. He pulled off the cap of his eyeliner and pondered the black pencil. Would he be able to draw lines this time around? He nodded to Allen as he came up and joined Harry.

"You'll never know!" Julie said. "Now, you need to draw some lines, don't you?" Harry mock glared at her and reached up to outline his eyes. He would never get good at this. He dropped his hand and studied the effect. Okay, he was getting better...right? They weren't as squiggly as the first time he had tried it. He finished his lines and started on color.

"Nervous?" Allen asked as he started on his own lines.

"No. You?" Harry asked as he stared at the lipstick tube. He hated lipstick even more than drawing lines. Lipstick was for girls. He should not have to wear it.

"Terrified." Allen confessed with a shaky smile. "It's normal, from what Bevie says." Allen contemplated his first line with a slightly disgusted face before rolling his eyes and moving onto the second. "You, though, seem to be abnormal for a brand new actor. Everyone is usually nervous the first time around."

“Abnormality. The story of my life.” Harry said with a cocky grin. “You get used to it after a while.” Harry said, still eyeing the lipstick as he would a Death Eater.

“The lipstick won’t attack you, mate.” Allen said as he moved his head back and forth to look at his lines. Julie giggled from behind him and hid her smile behind her hand when both boys glared at her.

“I hate lipstick.” Harry told him. “Worse than brussel sprouts.” Allen snickered as he moved on from lines to foundation.

“Yeah, well, your dislike for brussel sprouts knows no bounds, but you might as well get used to the lipstick now. Just do it real quick.” Allen suggested as he covered a blemish. “Less painful that way.”

“Ha ha.” Harry told him. “Real funny.” Harry opened the tube and did his best. A flash out of the corner of his eye made him turn and he spotted Bug with a large grin on his face.

“Gotcha.” Bug said with a smirk while he shook the camera. Harry started towards him but was stopped by the sudden appearance of Bevie. Bug ran away, shouting to the girls that he caught a picture of Evan and lipstick. Harry groaned. He would never live it down now.

“Edmund!” Bevie threw an arm around Harry and steered him back towards the make up. “How are you this evening? Feeling alright? Nervous?”

Harry looked at his teacher, a little perplexed as to how he was supposed to answer him. “Which question would you like answered first, sir?”

“Never mind, never mind. You’re not nervous, are you? Butterflies in your stomach?” Bevie wrung his hands together and danced from foot to foot.

“No, sir. I’m fine.” Harry said as he turned back to the mirror.

“Alright, then. Edgar, the same?” He asked Allen with a worried face.

“Nothing I can’t handle, sir.” Allen said with a straight face. “I’ll be fine.” Bevie nodded and moved away, telling the boys that dress call would happen in just a few minutes.

“Why is Julie here?” Allen said in a whisper. “I was hoping that we would be spared her influence.”

“Her influence keeps me from looking like a ghost.” Harry told him. He and Allen did not have a chance to talk after that. Julie checked their make up efforts and seemed quite put out by the fact that “boys could never do make up”. Harry was a little insulted by that comment. He thought he had done a good job on his make up. He had managed to put on lipstick without help of any kind.

Harry nodded his thanks to one of the costume crew for his wardrobe. Dress call had happened just a few minutes before and everyone had gathered in front of the costume crew to wait for the final pieces of their characters. Harry went over towards the changing areas, pulled the curtain across his changing area, and removed his shirt. He changed quickly and was just pulling on his boots when he heard several girls giggling just on the other side of the curtain.

“Give it up, you lot!” He told them with a laugh in his voice. “I’m already changed!” He heard several disappointed sounds and one voice that said “it’s not fair!” before the giggling voices melted away. He had caught them before when he was being fitted. Paul had laughed a bit and told Harry that the girls were starting to notice Harry’s body. Harry had blushed at that announcement and had asked Paul never to mention it again.

Harry rejoined Allen outside at the mirrors for one last quick look at himself. The energy was growing exponentially as they heard the crowds beyond the stage. Harry stepped away from Allen and swung his cape about to land on his shoulders. He checked his face one last time and blinked. He was wearing his contacts and he felt like a different person. He smirked and felt Edmund start to settle over him. He stepped back from the mirror, nodded to Allen, and went to his

place. "Five minutes!" Harry heard from somewhere. Five minutes. He tilted his head to one side in a stretch, slowly raised it and lowered it to the other side, and backwards. He took a deep breath and felt all of the tension leave his body. He dropped into leg stretches, just to give him something to do until he was ready to head onstage. He popped back up to his feet and started calming breathing exercises. The energy of the backstage was with him, but it was different from the giddy energy of yesterday. It was focused and determined. "One minute! Places, everyone." Harry checked his mark and nodded to the boy playing Gloucester, his father. He waited for Bevie to give them their cue and stepped out into the world of King Lear.

Harry stepped out onto the lonely stage with a rolled paper in his hands. He lowered his head a bit. He was deep in thought and tapped the rolled paper against his forehead as though it helped him to sort his thoughts. He raised his eyes and stopped, struck by an idea in thought. "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law my services are bound." Harry felt rather than heard a hush fall in the auditorium. "Wherefore should I stand in the plague of custom and permit the curiosity of nations to deprive me, for that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines lag of a brother?" Harry clasped his hands behind his back and looked up at a point and beyond. "Why bastard? Wherefore base?"

Harry turned on his heel and moved to a wall on his left and leaned against it. "When my dimensions are as well compact, my mind as generous, and my shape as true, as honest madam's issue? Why brand they us with base? With baseness? Bastardy? Base, base?" His hand rose and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Who in the lusty stealth of nature take more composition and fierce quality than doth within a dull, stale, and tired bed go to th' creating a whole tribe of fops got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then," He pushed off the wall and moved to the center stage with his rolled paper in one hand.

"Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land." He punctuated each word with a shake of the paper. "Our father's love," he raised his eyebrows "is to the bastard Edmund as to th' legitimate." He lowered the paper and stared into space for a moment before continuing. "Fine word, "legitimate"!" He raised his hand and brushed the air as though brushing away dust from a surface. "Well, my legitimate," he

raised the paper again, "if this letter speed and my invention thrive, Edmund the base shall top th' legitimate." He smiled as though he could see his future before his eyes. Edmund would have land and power through no other course but his own making. "I grow, I prosper." He looked down at the rolled up paper in his hand. He raised it to his eye level for all to see. "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"

The applause happened so suddenly that Harry was nearly thrown out of character. It crashed into his ears and deafened him. What had happened? What was going on? Harry realized that the applause was for him. It was for his performance and his abilities. They liked him for being able to perform and nothing else. No one out there in the audience (aside from those who already knew him) knew or cared that he was Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived. The applause was for him. Harry fought against a grin and held his position as an idea swept through him. This was what he wanted to do! This and nothing else. He wanted to be an actor and perform like this until he was old and gray. Forget being the Boy-Who-Lived. He could be someone else with every new show!

Gloucester entered and the applause died down slowly through his lines until the audience was silent for Harry's next line. Harry gave an inward smile. Now, gods, stand up for wizard turned actor.

Harry stood backstage for curtain call. He was hot and sweaty from all the lights and he was exhausted, but it was a good kind of exhaustion. It was an accomplished exhaustion. He swung his cape onto his shoulders and shrugged to make it fall correctly. Bevie announced his and Allen's names and Harry walked out onstage with his "brother".

The clapping for King Lear and Cordelia increased when he and Allen appeared. Harry took his bows as Bevie had taught him and moved to his place for the others to appear. He could not see past the first row with the lights, but he was almost sure he could hear Hermione from her seat. He waited patiently and clapped along with everyone else until the curtain closed entirely. "Everyone go out into the hallway. Meet and greet!" Bevie ushered them into the hallway and they lined up as he directed. Harry was the most uncomfortable about

this part. Performing was fine; he was Edmund then. Now, he was Harry again. Or Evan, at the very least.

The doors to the auditorium opened and the audience poured out into the hallway to mingle with the actors. Harry stood still and waited. He would wait until most of the audience had left until he went in search of Hermione and Paul. And his aunt, if she was here. He hoped she was. She had said she was coming. He was startled when a random woman walked up to him. "You did such a good job, dear." She said as she held out her hand. "Well done." Harry thanked her and she walked away. That had been...strange. Allen grinned at him and shrugged.

"Excellent job." A man said in front of Harry. "You were Edmund." Well, that had been the idea, right? The man moved away and was replaced by another person who congratulated Harry and Allen on their sword fight.

"Allen?" Harry whispered as a man moved away from them. "What is going on?"

"What did you think happened in a meet and greet?" Allen asked with a smirk. "We get our praise and worship here, as well as on stage. Relax and enjoy it. You deserve it."

"Absolutely brilliant." A woman told Harry while her husband rolled his eyes. Harry couldn't help but smile at the man. The man winked and allowed his wife to drag him further down the line. Harry still wasn't sure what was expected of him, so he thanked each person for their compliments and looked around for familiar faces in the crowd.

"Evan!" Hermione's screech gave him exactly two point three seconds of warning before he found himself being hugged, effectively blocking him from a teenage girl who had chosen to hover around him and Allen. Harry had an idea as to why she was doing it, but he hesitated to try and confirm her reasons. He really didn't want to know.

“Hey, Mi.” Harry said as he returned the hug. “Did you enjoy the show?” He asked with a smile.

“Did I enjoy the show?” Hermione repeated. “Skywalker, you were phenomenal. I didn’t recognize you up there!” Hermione then proceeded to lecture Harry for five minutes about his performance and how much she had loved every second.

“Hermione!” Harry looked up to find Mr. and Mrs. Granger coming towards him. “There you are.” She shook her head. “That was quite a performance.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Granger.” He smiled and nodded. “Hermione was just telling me that...for the eighth time.”

“Sorry. It was brilliant.” Hermione said to her mother. Harry smiled and ducked his head. He didn’t think he would ever get used to this.

“I was just doing what Professor Bevington told me to do.” He said and pointed towards his teacher. The man was talking rather quickly with another man. Harry could only guess that it was about the show. “I just followed directions.”

“Well, son, you follow directions to a ‘T’.” Mr. Granger said. “That was rather amazing to watch.” Harry wondered how many times he would be complimented this evening.

“Thank you, sir.” He said. “I have your costume for you.” Harry told him.

“Costume?” Hermione’s mother turned and stared down her husband. “Costume?”

“Uh-oh.” Hermione whispered. “Mum doesn’t know Dad gave us those costumes.” Hermione explained to Harry. “She threatened to make him do all of his own cooking. Dad’s hopeless when it comes to the kitchen.” Hermione smiled. “Let’s see how this plays out!”

Harry could not understand why Hermione would want her parents to fight with each other over something like this or why she enjoyed it and found it entertaining. He had always avoided his aunt and uncle when they had fought. Granted, it never happened very often, but it was bad when it did happen. His uncle was never in a good mood when it was all over. Harry had hid outside more than once rather than allow his uncle to find him after such events.

“Hello, Harry.” He heard his aunt whisper in his ear. He turned and found her smiling at him. He would never get used to that expression being directed at him. She cocked her head to the side. “You did very well tonight.” She said.

“Thank you, Aunt Petunia.” Harry said as he stepped closer to her. “I’m glad you could make it.” Harry tried to relax, but he had not spent a lot of time alone with his aunt. He was a little uncomfortable, even with all the people about.

“ You did an excellent job, young man!” A rather boisterous gentleman said as he stopped in front of Harry and offered his hand. Harry accepted it and shook it. He remembered that Bevie had been talking with him earlier when Harry had pointed Bevie out to the Grangers. “Gerald Saxton, Mr. James. Wonderful to meet you. Is this your mum?” He asked, looking at Petunia. “You must be very proud of him. You have a very talented child.”

“I am proud of him, Mr. Saxton.” She answered. “Very proud.” She gave the man what Harry knew to be her ‘most charming smile’ and the man congratulated Harry again before moving on to Allen.

Harry was fighting to stand there with his aunt while others came up and spoke with him about his part. Bevie had not mentioned that it would be like this. No mention of this at all before opening night. He probably wanted to ensure he would still have a cast and had thought this would be a nice surprise of some sort. If this was a surprise, then Harry hated surprises. Harry had not liked crowds since his eleventh birthday when he and Hagrid had been bombarded by half the wizarding world (that’s what it had felt like, anyway) and his dislike had only grown since then. This crowd was making Harry feel trapped

and he wanted nothing more than to get away from them all and go somewhere safe and quiet. Alone. He was ready to do just that when his aunt's hand lightly settled on his shoulder. He felt the tension ease out of him. His aunt was here. That meant he was safe. She had faced fully trained wizards for him. Harry took a deep breath and felt his patience renew.

The crowds finally started to thin and Harry was grateful. He was ready to wash off his make up and get rid of the annoying itch. He reached up to rub at a particularly annoying itch and found his aunt catching his hand. "I am very proud of you, Harry." She told him in a quiet and earnest voice. "I've never seen something so powerful before. That man was right. You are very talented."

Harry, for some reason, found those four sentences meant more to him than any other praise he had received that evening. He gave her a true smile. "Thank you, Aunt Petunia." He saw her look behind him and he turned.

"Remus!" Remus stepped forward and pulled Harry into a hug. "You came!" Harry's voice was muffled, but he had a feeling that Remus would be able to understand him.

"Of course I did." Remus said. "I promised I would. I just had to fight against this huge crowd and then there was this rather large group gathered around you, fawning over getting to meet you and shake your hand."

Harry glared at Remus and stepped back from the hug. "You know I hate crowds." Harry whispered.

"I know." Remus smiled and ruffled Harry's hair with a quick hand. "That's why I tease you about them." Remus turned and greeted Hermione as she returned from her spectator sport of her parents' fight.

"Who won?" Remus asked with a knowing glint. Hermione had explained her parents' argument to him just a few minutes before when she pointed him in Harry's direction.

“Dad did. Mum didn’t forbid him from giving us the costumes, just the pictures. She’s agreed to make his favorite for dinner tomorrow.” Hermione shrugged. “They’ve already kissed and made up. I was sure they were going to start snogging in another second, but I had to remind them that they were in a school with impressionable young children. They stopped just in time.” Hermione gave a theatrical shudder and smiled. “Parents kissing. Ugh.”

“Sorry to cut this short, um, Evan.” Hermione’s mother said as she walked up. “Hermione does have to get up early in the morning to return to school.”

“Five more minutes, Mum?” Hermione asked with wide eyes. “Please? I have something really important to tell him.” Hermione’s mother gave her the look that all mothers give when faced with their offspring’s pleas for ‘just a few more minutes’.

“I’m timing you.” Her mother said with a smile. “Go.”

“May I borrow him for a minute?” She asked Petunia before dragging Harry away from everyone else. Hermione checked their surroundings before turning back to Harry. “I didn’t have the time to write in the Mini-Messenger about this and last night wasn’t a good opportunity with my escort.” She said as she made a face at the idea. “I wanted to tell you that Dumbledore has become a little more aggressive.”

“What do you mean?” Harry hissed. Dumbledore becoming aggressive on any front was a bad idea all around.

“I can’t go anywhere without a Protector following me. Our friends try to stay near me, but there are times when they can’t be there. It’s mostly Ron and Parvarti, but I’m ready to go a bit spare.” Hermione confessed. “I’ve succeeded in making Parvarti feel a bit ridiculous over the whole thing, but Ron has become insufferable.” Hermione stopped and saw Harry’s face. “Stop thinking right there. I’m not telling him a thing! I refuse.” She put her hands on her hips and stared Harry down. “And don’t think that means you can pull out your

wand and do magic to call someone here. You are staying here and I am just going to up the ante."

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked.

"Make his life miserable, of course. What else would I do?" She gave Harry her plotting grin and laughed a little. "I just need to contact our friends with the exploding presents and things will get going from there."

Harry smirked at the idea of a lot of Weasley items invading Hogwarts. He almost wished he could be there to see it. "Please, Mi. Be careful. Get out if things become too difficult. He sounds like he's becoming desperate." Harry told her. "I don't want anything to happen to you if he decides to do something drastic to find me."

"He doesn't really have proof right now. He has vague suspicions, but he can't do anything until he gets some actual proof." Hermione explained. "I can handle him. I just wanted to let you know about it. I know how you are about being told things that concern you." She looked around the corner and saw her mother point to her watch. "I've got to go." Hermione hugged Harry and smiled. "Take care of yourself, Skywalker. Please take care."

"I will. I have enough people here who take care of me." Harry said with a smile. "Let's get back before your mum explodes."

Fudge was working late –again- and he was wishing that he had never heard the name of Dumbledore. He cursed the man with every breath in his body. That barmy old wizard was ruining all of his hard work! He couldn't get a straight answer out of the man about any situation. Now this thing with Potter had emerged. Requests to see the boy for goodwill type things with the Ministry had failed and outright demands were ignored...at the boy's request, of course. Fudge had yet to see the Potter boy and all letters addressed to the Boy-Who-Lived were returned unopened, not even touched by Potter at all. Dumbledore had to be hiding Potter away for his own use. That was the only explanation for the sudden shyness of Harry Potter from all other wizards save Dumbledore and his "instructors", handpicked by Dumbledore himself, no doubt. Fudge could no longer stand for it.

The wizarding public deserved to know how Harry Potter was and Fudge needed to know where he was. It was time to force Dumbledore's hand. He would have to reveal where the boy was hidden or face the public's wrath.

Fudge was not concerned with the Dark Lord. Potter was stowed away somewhere with fully trained wizards at his beck and call for training and safety. The Dark Lord wouldn't bother trying to attack him there. There would be no point to it, save as an exercise in futility. There was no thing that Fudge had learned about the Dark Lord since his "official" return. He did not do "futile". Each one of his strikes was planned to the last flourish and blot. He did not ignore particulars. "Weasley."

Percy's head snapped up from his notes and turned to look at the Minister. "Send the article to the editor of the Daily Prophet with my seal attached. It's time for Dumbledore to stop hiding that wizarding world's hope away from the people." Weasley disappeared out the door and Fudge relaxed back into his chair. This move would create some discontent in the headmaster's popularity camp. He knew that Dumbledore would bow to the public's wishes and produce the boy for the world to see.

The boy was their last hope, after all. What else could be expected from the Boy-Who-Lived?

Author's Note: There you go. I hope that was long enough for you all. I can't say when the next chapter will be out, as I'm in the middle of several school projects at the moment. I hope you all enjoyed and don't forget about the forums!

Author's Note: Sorry it took so long. School was a nightmare and I really can't talk about it now. I'm now on Easter break so I have one or two days to enjoy myself before having to dive back into school life. Hermione threw her shoe at the annoying alarm clock and sank back into her bed when the annoying destroyer of dreams fell silent. "Finally!" she thought to herself as she burrowed deeper into her blankets and pillows. She heard a familiar 'pop' and groaned. "Go away, Rita." She mumbled from her pillow.

"Good morning, Hermione." Hermione's accomplice in presenting information to the rest of the Daily Prophet banned Hogwarts smiled and perched herself on the end of Hermione's bed. "Have I got some news for you!" The bug-like woman confided.

"News?" Hermione lifted her blanket and eyebrow at the same time. "Not this early." She groaned and pulled the blanket back over her head. "No news before dawn, please." She said, just noticing that the sun had yet to make an appearance. She felt something hit her legs.

"It's an advance copy of the Daily Prophet. The headline will interest you." Rita said with her glee coming through in her voice.

Hermione sat up and brushed her hair out of her face. She saw Rita eye it and she glared at the reporter. "Not a word about my hair." Hermione picked up the newspaper and opened it. She gave a gasp and dropped it a second later. The headline stood out clearly "Where is the Boy-Who-Lived? - Dumbledore Forbids Harry Potter Contact with Peers". Hermione gave a little grin. "He did it!"

"That he did. It seems our Minister Fudge has decided that Dumbledore is working against the interests of wizarding society and the Boy-Who-Lived's welfare." Rita gave a conspiratorial look to Hogwarts' most surprising rule breaker. "Word has it that Aurors are going to Mr. Potter's house at, oh, six a.m."

Hermione looked at her alarm clock and nearly shrieked. "It's five-thirty! Oh, where did I put their number?" She kicked off her blankets and rushed to her desk. She started digging through her papers.

“Clouds, Hermione?” Rita asked of Hermione’s pajamas.

“Better than cat-eye glasses.” Hermione snapped. “Ah! Here it is!” Hermione snatched up the paper that held the Dursley’s phone number and rushed downstairs to the phone. Rita followed at a more sedate pace and settled on the bottom step while Hermione punched in the number. “Come on, come on.” She mumbled to herself. “Mrs. Dursley? It’s Hermione Granger. Yes. Sorry for calling so early, but I wanted to let you know that Aurors are coming to your house in about half an hour. Yes. Right. No, I can’t tell you who told me, but I trust them. Right. You’re welcome.” Hermione hung up the phone and collapsed next to Rita. “Thank you for coming.”

“You’re welcome. I did as I promised.” Rita patted Hermione’s hand.

“Tea?” Hermione offered.

“That would be lovely.” Rita said. “Would you be willing to answer a few questions?” Rita asked as she followed Hermione into the kitchen.

“That depends on whether or not I can be anonymous.” Hermione said with a smile as she put water on to boil.

“Anonymous is fine.” Rita’s notebook and normal quill appeared for Hermione’s anonymous statement.

Harry woke up to the sound of Sensei’s voice. He rolled over and nodded to the man to show that he was awake. Sensei nodded and left. Harry was exempt from sparring and anything that could leave marks, but he still had to work out every morning. He would return to his normal training schedule once the play ended.

He hopped out of bed and narrowly avoided colliding with his desk. His Mini-Messenger was doing a little tap dance. “Lightsaber.” He said as he picked it up. Hermione’s handwriting appeared.

-Fudge snapped! He released an article to the Daily Prophet criticizing Dumbledore. The headline “Where is the Boy-Who-Lived? -

Dumbledore Forbids Harry Potter Contact with Peers” What do you think?

Harry snatched his pen and sat down at his desk to write out his reply.

-What do I think? I think this is going to cause some problems. Dumbledore doesn't like having his authority questioned. Stay with our friends, Mi. Stay out of his way. Take someone with you if you are called to his office. Please be careful, Mi.

-I can handle him, Skywalker. My mum is calling me. I'll talk to you later?

-Ok. Please take care, Mi.

Harry pushed away from his desk and sighed. It felt like things were starting to go out of control. Dumbledore was now backed into a corner, Hermione was under siege, Voldemort was turning strategies, and Fudge was starting to become wise to the fact that Harry was not at Hogwarts.

“Deshi?” Sensei said from the hallway.

“Coming, Sensei.” Harry said as he pulled on his uniform. He hoped that his laps would number less than twenty. He was still tired from his performance the night before and there would be another one that night. Such was life.

Paul shifted the folders under his arm and thought about his last session with Harry. The boy was going in leaps and bounds with his aunt. Paul had found from whom he had inherited his stubbornness, for Harry's aunt was just as stubborn as the nephew. It was almost frightening to see how much they were alike in some respects and then be completely opposite in others.

“Paul!” He heard Harry shout from behind him. He turned in time to see Harry round the corner and try to stop. He smirked as the boy slid across the floor and into the wall. “Ow! Who waxed the floor?” He said as he picked himself up and hurtled towards Paul again. “Paul!

Please say I can go! Please! It says I need your permission to go and I need to go! It will complete my life. Please? Pleeeeease?"

"Why don't you tell me what you're begging for first?" Paul said with a patient smile.

"You know what I'm begging for. There's a London trip for theater. We get to spend a weekend in London and see a musical and something from Shakespeare. Bug also told me that we'll be staying up late and junk food will be involved, just like normal kids. Please, Paul?" Harry gave his best impression of puppy eyes to date as he waited for Paul's answer. Harry thought the 'normal kid' argument would clench it for Paul. He was always going on about how Harry should act like a 'normal kid'.

"I don't know." Paul hedged for a few minutes. "You still have to ask your aunt."

"I don't need to ask her. I can pay for it myself. There's no need to bother her about it." Harry said with a confused expression. "Please, Paul?"

Paul studied Harry for a minute. What Harry had said was true. Harry could pay for the trip himself. Remus would be more than glad to draw the money out for Harry and make all arrangements. Remus had met with Paul several times about Harry's status in the wizarding world and the impact Harry had on it and the impact the status had on Harry. They both agreed that Harry needed to try being a normal kid as much as possible. The fame and wealth was daunting to Paul and he was thirty some odd years old. He couldn't imagine being Harry's age and expected to carry out his responsibilities or fame. There was another issue that could be addressed here. Harry needed to accept Petunia's authority for now, until he was seventeen in the wizarding world, or eighteen in the normal one.

"Your aunt is your legal guardian. She will need to give her permission for you to go to London. There's a permission form she'll need to sign. I'll send it to her, but you need to ask first." Paul told Harry. He watched as Harry's face fell and blanked. Paul felt the first

tendrils of cold appear around him and ignored it. Harry needed his focus.

“What if she says no?” Harry asked. Paul almost gave his permission at the look on Harry’s face. He looked so forlorn at the thought of not being able to go to London.

“You won’t know until you ask her.” Paul told Harry. Harry shrugged and sighed. “Let me know when you want to call her. If she says yes, then I can mail out a permission slip. Okay?” Paul asked.

“Okay.” Harry said as he turned and walked away. He looked to be deep in thought and Paul wanted to say it was how to convince his aunt how to say ‘yes’, but Paul knew that that was not the subject of Harry’s thoughts. It felt more like a strategy of how to carry on without the trip in his future. Paul frowned and made a note to himself to call Petunia and explain about the trip and how much it meant to Harry to be able to go. He only hoped that Petunia would allow it.

The next few days passed quickly for Harry. He still had classes everyday, workouts with Sensei, therapy with Paul, and his Hogwarts curriculum to follow. He wanted to dive into his bed and sleep a thousand years, but felt that he would not want to wake up if he did manage to sleep.

He had noticed that his emotions were a little unpredictable lately and they were affecting his rest. He couldn’t really explain why, but he would be fine one minute and ready to cry in the next. Paul had noticed and started working with Harry on various calming techniques, but nothing seemed to be working. Worse still, they could feel temperature changes happening all the time as Harry switched between his emotions. Harry had no explanation for it. Paul had given a few ideas, but Harry hesitated to think about them. He was in control; no one else had control over him. Bleys could not influence what was going on with him now.

The only good thing to come out of the calming techniques was a new type of therapy for him and his relatives. Well, Petunia, at any rate. He could only discuss his feelings with her when he was either

at a breaking point (uncomfortable for both of them) or almost asleep. Harry had chosen the almost asleep stage, as his magic made the room cold when he was really upset. He found he felt better after each session, as he was able to tell his aunt exactly as he felt without repercussions. He could cry and she would let him. He could ask questions and she would answer them if she had the answer. They still had their moments of misunderstandings (she refused to allow any magic outside of homework, even once Harry turned seventeen) and disagreements (Harry refused to discuss a 'bedtime' rule; he would sleep when he wanted and not before!), but they were slowly starting to develop a relationship that could possibly work once Harry returned home. There was no longer an "if" in the subject.

Petunia had told him about Aurors showing up the day an article about him appeared in the Daily Prophet. The Aurors had tried to bluster their way in but found that the wards on the house would not permit them into the actual house. They could only stand on the front step and call attention to themselves due to their robes. Harry had found the story particularly funny and asked Petunia to take some pictures so he could see their faces.

Harry had written a letter to Petunia, explaining about the trip to London and why Harry felt he needed to go. He had not received an answer as to whether or not she would allow him to go, but Harry had alerted Remus about the trip and asked to have funds ready, just in case she did decide that Harry could go. Harry had tried to keep from sounding too pathetic about it, but he knew his voice trembled the slightest bit when Remus asked a few questions about it.

Vernon was another story. Harry and Vernon both were not interested in establishing a relationship like the one Petunia and Harry were building. Harry did not want Vernon as a major part of his life (and certainly not as a parental figure). Vernon said he would house Harry until the boy was ready to leave, but not to expect anything more than that. Harry was happy with the idea and nothing Paul could say changed his mind. He had Remus; he didn't need Vernon anymore except to provide dinner conversation and atmosphere.

Harry broke out of his thoughts and glanced at his watch. He was going to be late! Scratch that, he was already late. He swore under

his breath and picked up his pace to get to his first class. He could already hear the news program they watched every morning from the hallway. He opened the door to his classroom and stopped as the class turned as one and started at him. The way they were staring...it wasn't a "you're late" stare. "What?" He asked his classmates. He noticed that his teacher was off to the side with a mobile phone to his ear. What was going on?

Julie pointed up at the screen. He turned and saw his picture being displayed. What in the world? The news anchor's voice came on. "Police need your help to locate this sixteen year old boy, Harry James Potter. He is needed for questioning as a witness to several murders. He has green eyes, black hair, and a unique scar in the shape of a lightening bolt in the middle of his forehead. Again, please call the number on your screen if you have any information." Harry reached up out of reflex and smoothed his hair over his scar.

Harry's teacher slid his cell phone into his pocket and came forward. "Harry, is it?" The man said. "It's going to be okay." Harry felt the need to back up against the door. "I've just called them and someone is on the way."

"What!" Harry rasped as he fumbled for the doorknob. "You don't understand." He croaked as he managed to grasp the doorknob. His teacher stepped forward and put his hands on Harry's shoulders.

"You're going to be okay, son." His teacher told him. Funny. Harry had liked the man before this.

"No." Harry opened the doorknob and slipped out of the man's grasp. He stumbled into the hallway and backed away from his teacher. "You don't understand, sir."

"Harry." The man reached out a hand to Harry.

"My name is Evan!" Harry snapped. He couldn't allow the man to continue using his name. Harry felt his breath start coming in gasps. Oh, no. He knew what this was. Panic attack. He heard the front secretary's voice coming up the stairs. Harry's eyes bugged as

Kingsley Shacklebolt's face appeared, along with another man Harry did not know. They were both dressed like Muggles, but Harry knew that their wands were there. Harry fought for breath. He couldn't go back. Not yet.

"Harry." Shacklebolt said as he crested the last step. Harry's control snapped. He ran. "Harry! No!" Shacklebolt called after him.

How had they managed to get here so quickly? He glanced behind him and turned back around to put on some speed. They were gaining on him. He wasn't sure where he was going. Just away. He stumbled as Kingsley caught up to him and tried to grab him around the waist. Ha. Harry was too tall for the Auror to grab him like he used to. Harry's mind cleared and he threw back his head into Shacklebolt's nose. Harry heard a muttered curse and he hid a smile as the Auror loosened his grasp enough to allow Harry to free an arm. Harry drove his elbow into Shacklebolt's stomach. The larger Auror dropped him and the other ran up and raised his wand, obviously surprised that Harry was putting up a fight. Harry tossed a small bit of magic at the man and was satisfied to see the man's wand go flying from his hand. He turned to face Shacklebolt and kicked the man's wand out of his hand.

"Harry, we're here to take you home." Shacklebolt said calmly.

"I'm not going back there." Harry told him.

"To Hogwarts, I mean." Shacklebolt clarified for Harry.

"I'm not going back!" Harry snarled. Didn't anyone listen to him?

"You don't have a choice, Harry." Shacklebolt said with an apologetic look.

Harry faced off against them for a second before doing something rude and drastic: he kicked each of them in the groin and watched as they dropped to the ground. "Sorry!" he shot over his shoulder as he took off again. He knew that he had only bought himself some time. A

numbing charm would sort them out in just a few seconds, once they got over their shock of having been kicked in a very private place.

Harry dashed around the corner and nearly felt his heart stop as someone grabbed him from behind and pulled him backwards into a small hallway. He opened his mouth to scream, in hopes that someone would hear him. A familiar calloused hand clamped over his mouth. "Calm, deshi." Harry immediately stopped fighting and went limp in his teacher's arms. "Those men? Your world?" Sensei removed his hand from Harry's mouth.

Harry gasped in air and reached up to hold onto Sensei's arm around his chest. "Yes, Sensei. They're here to take me back." Harry whispered, afraid to go louder than that.

"Hmm." Sensei's arm tightened around Harry, almost as though Sensei knew Harry needed it. "Come, deshi." Sensei released Harry, but immediately pulled Harry close to him and put an arm around his shoulders. He led Harry down the hallway and to a side door Harry had not noticed before. Come to think of it, Harry had not followed his old habit of sneaking around at night here as he usually did at Hogwarts. The door led to the gym. Sensei shouted something to Rick, who was practicing in the middle of the floor. Harry was surprised to not understand what was being said. What were they speaking? "Come, deshi." Sensei said as he reappeared from his office. He barked out one last order to Rick as he led Harry out another door. Harry stayed close to his teacher, his head down and heart in his throat. He could almost feel wands pointing at him, ready to stun him and whisk him back to Hogwarts and the Boy Who Lived.

"Deshi." Sensei opened a door to outside and motioned Harry through. Sensei pulled Harry close again and ushered him towards a parking lot behind the school. The lights on the car flashed once, Sensei opened the passenger door, and nudged Harry towards the seat. "Seatbelt." The man ordered. Harry obeyed without comment.

He and Sensei had had a long talk after Diagon Alley about Harry being in Sensei's hands. The man had made himself clear: Harry was to obey Sensei's orders in times of danger without question. The look

on the man's face warned Harry that the man would not allow Harry to be harmed by magic again.

Sensei started the car and pulled out of the parking lot just as doors opened on the side. Harry could just make out the Aurors as Sensei turned the corner. Harry relaxed into his seat and took a deep breath. That had been close! He looked at Sensei for a few seconds before moving his book bag to the back seat. "Where are we going, Sensei?"

"My home. For a little while." Sensei told him with a small smile.

"Oh, okay." Harry said. It would be a little awkward, going to his teacher's home, but he would be back at St. Jude's for dinner, at the latest. Sensei chuckled next to him and Harry looked at the man with a vague uneasiness. That little laugh never meant good things to Harry. "What?" He asked the man.

"My daughters will be pleased." He told Harry with a laugh. "A new boy in the house."

Harry threw a disgusted look at his teacher before turning to stare out the window. Girls. There was some foreign territory.

"Come in. Shoes by the door." Harry toed off his trainers and followed his teacher into the house. "My home is yours." Sensei said, motioning Harry to the couch in the sitting room. A large racket at the window caused Harry to jump up from the couch and look for a hiding place. He wasn't scared; no, he was just still on edge from being pursued by one person he used to trust. "Calm, deshi. I will check." Sensei pushed away the curtains and looked through the glass. "An owl."

Harry thought for a few seconds before inching towards the window. This was the first time since Diagon Alley that he had left St. Jude's and he wondered if there were some kind of wards on the place that kept owls away from him. He peeked through the curtains, careful to hide his face from view, and looked at the owl. "It's Hedwig. She's mine." Harry told him. "It's safe to let her in."

Sensei opened the window and Hedwig flew straight to Harry. She landed on his outstretched arm and studied her master. He looked much better than the last time she had seen him and she settled her wings, satisfied that the boy's relation had made the correct decision. She fluffed up her feathers in happiness. "Hey, girl. I missed you." Hedwig's feathers fluffed up further in pleasure and she held her letter forward with great pride at a job well done.

Harry took the letter with a smile and scratched Hedwig's head as reward. "You're such a smart owl." He worked to get through all of the feathers on her head and Hedwig settled down on his arm to enjoy her reward. Harry moved back to the window. "Why don't you find a close tree to rest in? I'll come find you later if I need you." Harry was surprised to find that Hedwig only clamped her talons around Harry's arm all the tighter and stared at the letter in his hand. "Told to wait for a reply, did you?" Hedwig bobbed her head once and hooted. "Alright. Find a perch on the window sill then, until I'm done."

"A beautiful creature, deshi." Sensei said as Harry turned to his letter.

"Yes, she is. She's been my friend for the last six years." Harry looked down at his letter to find only his first name written on it. He recognized Remus's hand writing and opened the envelope. He pulled out the Muggle stationary and opened it.

Harry,

Paul called us and told us what has happened. We never thought that Fudge would go this far to find you. Paul assures me that your teacher was a trembling mass of nerves by the time he finished with him. We are working on getting the "dogs" called off. The Aurors have been at your aunt's home several times, but they cannot make it past the front step. The wards that no longer allow Professor Dumbledore on your street are protecting your family from the Aurors and Minister Fudge. I am with your aunt right now. We are studying the laws to make sure that he cannot do this.

We are not going to allow him to take you. You are not an object, Harry, and that's what he's trying to make of you. We will not allow it. If everything has gone to plan, you are at your Sensei's house right now, probably feeling terribly betrayed by not knowing that we have been planning behind your back. We're sorry, but your aunt demanded that you be taken care of at all costs. Sensei volunteered his home as a safe house, should the worst happen and someone discovered you at St. Jude's. Oh, your aunt wants to write a bit to you. Take care of yourself, Harry.

Harry,

Please follow the rules of Sensei Leonard's home until we can figure out how to keep you safe. I would have done something else if I knew how to keep you safe, but I am unable to protect you except through the wards. That and there are those Aurors coming up at all hours. I didn't want you to feel like you were in prison here. You'll be able to relax at Sensei's and won't find yourself looking over your shoulder. He promised to keep you safe until you can return. Please stay safe, Harry. I'll be calling later this evening so we can talk.

Love,

Aunt Petunia

Harry folded the letter over and looked up at Sensei. "You could have told me, you know." He told the man. Harry picked up his book bag and slid the letter into his journal. The letter was the first Petunia had ever written him. Even better, she had written "love" as the closing. He was not sentimental!

"Yes, but where would the fun be?" Sensei asked as he stood up from his chair. "Something to drink?" He asked.

"Yes, please." Harry said as he dug through his book bag for paper and a pen. Sensei disappeared into the kitchen and Harry made a triumphant noise as his hand hit something. He found his literature notebook and felt a firm satisfaction as he ripped out a sheet of paper.

His teacher, the traitor, had said that no one should remove paper from the notebook. Harry was tempted to rip out another sheet of paper, but restrained himself so that he could write his reply for which either Petunia or Remus had asked.

Dear Aunt Petunia and Remus,

You're right. I am where you set up. It's nice and kind of isolated from the rest of the neighborhood. I am also a little disturbed that you didn't see fit to release this information to me (yes, we've been watching spy movies again. The other guys can't get enough of them). I will trust your judgment for now because you are the adults. I would like a full explanation when I return to St. Jude's or home, whichever comes first.

Remus, please make sure you take your potion later this week. And take care of yourself. Have you looked at cars like I asked? You need one and I won't take "no" for an answer.

Aunt Petunia, please be careful. Aurors are really good police and I'm afraid that they will be a little zealous in trying to find me. So long as they aren't Unspeakables. You'll have to ask Remus what those are. I'm still not sure. May I please go to London? Please? It will complete a vital part of my dramatic education. Please? Will you accept a bribe of me never getting into trouble again? Please? Okay, I'll quit bothering you for now. I promise to follow every single one of Sensei's instructions while at his home. I'll stay safe and I guess I'll talk to you later tonight.

Your nephew,

Harry

Harry folded the paper and slid it into the envelope that originally carried his letter and crossed out his name before adding his aunt's name on the front. He called his owl and folded the flap into the envelope. "Hedwig, please take this to either Aunt Petunia or Remus. Do not let it be intercepted." Hedwig gave him an affronted look and Harry read it carefully. "Yes, I know you're the smartest owl in the

world. And the most beautiful. Just be careful, okay? I don't want to lose you just because people are looking for me." Harry said calmly. Hedwig head-butted Harry and took the envelope in her beak.

Harry watched her fly out of the window and smiled. He had missed her! Sensei came back into the room at the moment, carrying two steaming mugs. Harry smiled and accepted his, juggling it from one hand to the other as he waited for it to cool. "Did your owl leave?" Sensei asked with a slightly curious voice.

"Yes. She is a post carrier for magical people. My aunt used her to send a letter to me and she requested a letter back from me. I think Hedwig will be back sooner or later. She usually appears where I am most of the time. I don't know what kept her from St. Jude's." Harry said as he moved from the window and back to the couch.

"Hmm." Sensei said with a sigh.

Harry studied the room around him while he sipped at his tea. The sitting room was just that, for sitting. There was no television, books, or radio. Nothing but a couch, two chairs, and a coffee table occupied the floor space. The floors were hardwood and a light tan color. The walls themselves were white with a few paintings on the walls. Harry wasn't sure what of, but it looked to be fields of some kind. "They are of Japan." Sensei's voice broke Harry out of his thoughts.

"Pardon?" Harry said, his brain not quite caught up with him.

"The paintings. They are paintings of Japan, done when I was just a little younger than you." Sensei explained.

"You did them?" Harry asked.

"You are not the only one with secrets, deshi." Sensei said with a smile. "Come. I will show you where you are sleeping tonight." Sensei said as he put down his cup.

"Won't I be going back to St. Jude's tonight?" Harry asked. "I can't miss too much school."

“No worrying, deshi. You will be here a few days. My wife will be happy to have another young one around.” He said with a smile. “Paul will bring your things later tonight when he brings Rick home.” Harry blinked as he realized that the sentences Sensei had just strung together were the most perfect Harry had heard from his teacher. He stood and followed Sensei down the hallway and up the stairs. “Bathroom here.” Sensei said, showing him the room. “My room, if you need me during the night. Rick’s room.” Sensei said, motioning to the door. “My daughters’ room. They are thirteen and twelve and will pursue you.” Sensei warned Harry with a smirk. Harry gave a good-natured groan and rolled his eyes. “Guest room.” Sensei said finally. He flicked on the light and Harry saw a room done up in sky blue and crème. “Leave your book bag here.” Harry nodded and set it just inside the door. “Now, for the fun.”

Harry followed his Sensei to the front door where he and Sensei pulled on their shoes. Sensei led him around the house to the garden behind the house where Harry saw another building. Sensei opened the door and pushed three buttons by the door. Harry’s eyes widened as he saw what the building contained. “Yes, my own dojo.” Sensei said. “You will be joining the classes. I have a uniform for you.” Harry felt his jaw threaten to touch the floor. The gym at school was fine, but this! This was wonderful! He finally registered what Sensei said and looked up at the man. Sensei was looking at him with a predatory look. Harry could almost feel that he was going to be working out constantly. It felt like a last desperate push of some kind. “This will be fun.” Sensei said to Harry. Harry could only nod.

Hermione sighed and pushed her hair out of her face for the thousandth time during the lesson. She only hoped that it wouldn’t catch fire from the flame under her potion. She frowned and thought about the message Harry had sent her. She couldn’t believe that Fudge would go as far as he did. Announcing Harry’s name on television would have been enough to send her into a panic, but the picture? That just made her thoughts a little homicidal. Hermione could almost consider choking the life out of Fudge entertainment at this point.

Dumbledore was not happy at all. He had tried to corner her several times in the past three days since the article first came out. She had managed to avoid him by ducking into the girls' bathroom (even though she had to spend twenty minutes talking to Moaning Myrtle), checking herself into the Hospital Wing through the help of one of the twins' newest products, which was guaranteed to give the eater unexplainable spots for twenty-four hours, and dodging about like she was an agent in a Bond film. She was heartily sick of it! She was ready to go a bit spare and was considering new ways of removing herself from Dumbledore's influence. She even considered falling off a broom, except that everyone would see through that within seconds. Hermione was well-known for her firm dislike of being on a broom. The yearly flying lessons she had to endure were bad enough. Getting on one of her own volition, well, she just wasn't ready to try it.

She reached up to add some lacewings to her cauldron when she noticed her hand shaking and she drew it back. It was happening. She was going spare. She took a deep breath and tried again, happy to see that she managed to do so without losing her calm. She studied the next step and stirred as her book directed. She felt more than saw her professor pass in front of her, but she registered that something was in her cauldron that was not supposed to be there. She took two seconds to identify the item, another two to figure out that it was potentially dangerous for it to be there, and another to realize that her cauldron was about to explode. A phrase from an old Muggle movie popped into her head and it was out of her mouth before she realized she had even thought of it.

"HIT THE DECK!" Hermione leapt under her desk. All of the Muggle born students and most of the half-bloods followed her shouted instructions. The purebloods did as any smart person would do on a sinking ship. They followed the rats, or in this case, Muggle born and half-blood students.

Hermione's cauldron exploded in an astonishing light and sound displayed that she dared to think pretty. The entire room lit up and potion base started to rain down on the desks. Hermione's brain analyzed it and she realized that water was actually falling in the classroom. Her potion had turned from a volatile substance to water.

She remembered that Professor Snape had passed in front of her cauldron just before it blew up. That man had set her up!

She jumped as Professor Snape's livid face appeared in front of her and pulled her out from under the desk. "Everyone dump your cauldrons, gather your things, and leave!" He snarled at the class while keeping a firm hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Now!" he barked to the unresponsive class. Her classmates jumped as one and hurried to obey the professor's orders. Many a student shot Hermione a sympathetic look as he or she rushed out of the door. Drake, Hermione noticed, stayed behind.

The door shut behind the last student and Professor Snape removed his hand from her shoulder. Hermione reached up and rubbed it out of reflex. She looked at Snape, wondering what the man was going to do now. "Relax, Miss Granger. You are not in trouble." Snape told her.

"I should think not!" She snapped. "I was almost done with that, you know! You ruined all of my work." She plopped down on the nearest stool and actually pouted. Okay, that was a sign of her mental state, right there. She never pouted. Or whined. None of it.

Snape raised an expressive eyebrow and looked the classroom door. "Thank goodness the day is over." He said to himself. He walked back to Hermione and looked down at her. "Even I can tell something is troubling you. It can distract you and today's little staged explosion could have far worse repercussions." Snape told her.

"Are you asking me to confide in you?" She asked in shock.

"I don't know of anyone else on staff who knows what I know. Miss Granger, I'm going to put this bluntly with no regard for the sympathy and compassion that most females require for I consider you a rational creature." Hermione was shocked. He considered her rational? "I hope you will bear with me." Snape told her. He bent down so he could look her in the eye. "You look exhausted and I'm sure you haven't slept much in the past three days. You're not eating well and you have developed a certain tic near your right eye and your hands were shaking earlier. This all started when that

newspaper article came out and Albus suddenly became curious about you.” Snape told her. “You are a wreck.”

“Thank you for noticing, Professor.” Hermione said with a sarcastic tone. She only wanted to go curl up in bed for a few hours with a good book and some chocolate. After a long hot bath. Was that so wrong?

Snape stood and stared down at her. He made an odd noise and started walking to the door that led to his office. “Draco, Miss Granger.” He said as he opened the door. Hermione got up from her stool and followed behind Draco. She was surprised when she was led into a living room of sorts. “Yes, we are in my quarters. I have decided that since you have such a blatant disregard for potion safety rules that you will spend every free moment you have with me until you learn such important rules. You are a sixth year, after all.” Hermione wanted to hug her potions professor. He was protecting her from Dumbledore. She wouldn’t need to fall off her broom!

Draco pulled Hermione over to a couch and pushed her down on it. “Why don’t you have a nap?” Draco asked as he rifled through a chest next to the couch and produced a knitted afghan. “You look like you could use it. We’ll wake you in time for dinner.” He said.

Hermione opened her mouth to argue. She didn’t need a nap! She was not a three year old overtired from her big day out somewhere. She...Professor Snape raised an eyebrow at her and she toed off her shoes, took off her robe, and accepted the afghan from Drake with a heartfelt thanks. A pillow appeared on the couch and she settled down as the two of them disappeared into what looked to be a potions laboratory. She figured that Professor Snape would want to keep one in his chambers so that students would not bother his own personal equipment and stores of ingredients. She drifted off to the sound of talking between the two of them about something to do with the potion they were making.

Author’s Note: That was my longest chapter ever! Okay, if you have questions, just click on my name and then click on forums. Then you can leave me a message. Come on, you know you want to! Thanks, as always, to all who reviewed. You are my inspiration!

Author's Note: I am updating during Finals Week. I must be mad. I hope you all enjoy!

Someone was petting his head. Harry moaned at having his dream of a London theater trip disturbed and pulled the blanket over his head. He heard someone giggle and he opened one eye beneath his blanket. The absurdity of even being petted in his room did not make sense. His eye registered the color of the blanket and then he remembered that he was not in his room at all. "Evan, sweetie." Harry pulled down the blanket and opened his bleary eyes to see a vaguely familiar outline next to him.

"Mm?" He asked. Not the most eloquent thing he ever said, but it was the best he could manage at this point.

"Leonard's waiting for you in the kitchen." She told him, her blue eyes laughing at him as he struggled to reach full coherency. "Come on." She pulled him up to a sitting position. "We'll see you downstairs." She told him.

"K." Harry swore that one day he would be able to wake up and manage full sentences. Harry got to his feet and discarded his pajamas for his practice uniform. He put in his contacts and ran a hand through his hair in an attempt to straighten it. He pulled on socks and tied his gi top closed.

Sensei's wife, Lynn, had mothered him from the moment she had walked in the door with Sensei's daughters. Her actions reminded him of Mrs. Weasley without the fierce possessiveness. She offered food and drink to Harry, but didn't press him to take more than he could eat (even though she said he was too thin) and had shown him where everything was in the kitchen, should he be hungry later and no one was around to help him. He had felt awkward until she hugged him, smoothed his hair, and welcomed him to his "home away from home". It felt like home from that moment on. Harry wondered if Magic was somehow involved.

Sensei's daughters had been extremely helpful last night in showing Harry around the property and training hall. They both studied martial

arts, though one also did ballet and the other played piano. Neither seemed too frightening, only extremely curious about him. Harry stuck with the story Sensei had told them: Harry was only there for a short visit due to a security breach at the school. Neither daughter had seen the news. His identity was safe.

Paul had appeared after dinner last night with a box full of Harry's things. It looked like Harry was staying at Sensei's house until further notice. The box held mostly clothing, but Paul had included his school books, assignments, and one of his magic books. Harry had hidden it under all of the other books and had not taken it out around anyone else. He did not want to face the Ministry over revealing the magical world to Muggles. He had been lucky so far, but even Harry knew that luck could eventually run out if he wasn't careful.

Harry's teacher was on probation with St. Jude's. Harry would have liked to see him sacked, but Paul mentioned something about a stellar record thus far for the past twenty years. The man had been doing his "civic duty", or so he said. Harry wondered why the man felt it was his civic duty to call a number on television. Sure, it had looked convincing enough, but not everyone would call a number displayed on television, would they? Right?

Aunt Petunia had called the night before, as she had promised. She and Remus were working on the legality of what the Ministry was doing, but it was taking them a bit longer than they would have liked. Harry had to agree. The Ministry had no right doing something like this to him and the sooner they realized that, the better. He would have loved seeing Aunt Petunia putting a bunch of tough Aurors in their place. She had told him about it and he almost whined. That would have been very amusing to see. Aurors shouted down by a Muggle. Ha.

"There he is." Lynn said as Harry entered the kitchen. She motioned Harry to a chair and put a cup of tea in front of him.

"Thanks, Lynn." He mumbled. He loved tea. Or the caffeine in tea. He wasn't sure which. Harry felt her mess up his hair. Oh, well. He

reached up to smooth his hair down and heard her laugh. How did anyone manage to be up this early?

“Deshi.” Harry lifted his eyes to look at Sensei. “Drink, and then we run.” Sensei lifted his own cup to his mouth.

Harry nodded and started to drink his tea. He hoped breakfast was soon. His teenager body was already protesting his empty stomach. Giggles from the hallway made him turn to see the girls come in. “Morning, Evan!” They chimed.

“Morning.” Harry answered. Wow. Three whole coherent words in the space of two minutes. He should get a medal.

“Do you remember our names?” One asked as she received her own cup of tea.

“He’s still asleep, sis.” The other said as she sat down. “He won’t wake up until halfway through our run.” She told the other.

Harry blinked. He was going running with the girls? That...wasn’t too bad. “You’re, uh, Emily and Emiko.” He told the first who had asked if he remembered their names. “And you’re...Amy and Miyo.” Harry told them. The two of them looked at him in shock before breaking into applause.

“He’s conscious!” Emily/Emiko announced with pride. “He wakes up much faster than Taro!”

“Leave your brother’s sleeping habits alone.” Lynn said with a smile. “He’s always here when he has to be. And he’s awake.” She moved back to the stove where she was doing something that smelled wonderful.

“Who’s awake?” Rick asked as he walked into the kitchen. “Evan! Your hair!”

“Taro!” Harry watched as Rick’s eyes grew wide and he braced himself on the door jamb. He wondered why until he saw two black-clad figures leap onto Rick.

“Brat attack!” Rick said as he went down. He and his two sisters started tickling each other without mercy. Harry was glad that he was not included. He wasn’t sure what would happen.

“Brat attack every morning.” Sensei mumbled from across the table. “Since they were small. At my funeral, will be brat attack.” Harry smiled at Sensei’s statement.

“Alright, brats! I need some tea before our run.” Rick said as he shoved his sisters off of him.

“Aw!” Both girls complained at once as they returned to their tea. Harry smiled at their pouting faces and shook his head. He wasn’t sure if he thought he missed out on having sisters or not. He figured Hermione was enough.

“Hey, Evan needs another name!” Amy/Miyo said with a smile.

“If Evan is here for two more days.” Sensei said. “Only then.” He told the girl.

“Okay.” She said as she took her cup to the sink. “Meet you outside.” She said to her father as she dragged her sister with her.

“Which one is older?” Harry asked Rick. “They’re like twins.”

“Miyo is the older one.” Rick told him. “Dad, did you explain the name thing to Evan?” He asked.

“Yes, Taro.” Sensei said as he stood and rinsed out his cup. “Last night, he understood. Still?”

“Yes, Sensei.” Harry said, properly awake now. Sensei motioned for Harry to rinse out his cup and follow him. The name thing had

confused him at first, but Harry had found that everyone in the family had two names, one English and one Japanese. Rick was Taro, Emily was Emiko, and Amy was Miyo. Harry had to wonder what Lynn's was. He hadn't heard it yet.

Once outside, Sensei led him, Rick, and the girls through several stretches. Harry felt his blood start to move in his body. He was fully awake now and ready to run. He was amazed to find that he liked running. It was odd. Sensei pulled Harry beside him and started running. Harry followed the pace and ran next to Sensei.

"First shower!" Amy said as she dashed up the stairs.

"I call second!" Emily said as she dashed behind her.

"You have forty-five minutes until school!" Lynn called after them. "Uniforms are on your beds!" Harry thought that the organized chaos present in Sensei's home was much better than the rigid structure he had experienced as a child. He found himself thinking that he would like a home like this someday and blushed. Thoughts like that were not good for him to have. He had no idea if he was going to survive into adulthood.

"Alright to dream, deshi." Sensei said next to him. Harry jumped. He had not heard the man come up to him. "Dreams keep you alive."

"Yes, Sensei." Harry said. He agreed. He just wasn't sure if he would see his dreams fulfilled. How had Sensei known what Harry was thinking?

"Boys, come and get it." Lynn said from the kitchen. Rick thundered down the hall from the living room and grabbed Harry on his way.

"Ack! Rick!" Harry said as he felt his arm nearly leave its socket. "I need that arm!" Harry said as Rick pulled him into the kitchen.

"Food, Evan. You need food." Rick pushed Harry into a chair and took his own next to him. He started piling food onto Harry's plate.

“Leave him be, Rick.” Lynn said with a frown. “He’ll eat what he wants.” She said as she served herself. Harry noticed that she was busy piling food onto Sensei’s plate. So that’s where Rick got it.

Harry heard an odd noise twenty minutes later. It sounded like something heavy falling down the stairs. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the door to the kitchen swung open to reveal Amy. She was pulling a backpack on wheels behind her.

“How many times have we asked you to carry that down the stairs?” Lynn asked with a sigh.

“Um, not sure.” Amy said as she kicked her backpack towards the wall. “Sorry.” She said as she moved to her chair and started spooning breakfast onto her own plate.

“Try not to do it again.” Lynn told her.

“Yes, Mum.” Amy looked at Harry and rolled her eyes. Harry smiled back at her and returned his attention to his scramble. He heard the same noise five minutes later as Emily made her appearance.

Rick snorted when he heard the same speech given and he leaned over to Harry. “They know it ticks Mum off when they do that, so they just do it to annoy her.” He confided. Harry nodded and finished his breakfast. Why would anyone want to annoy their parents?

“Alright, you two.” Lynn said as she moved her plate to the kitchen. “Let’s get you to school!” Harry watched as Amy and Emily started a rather impressive operation. They each grabbed two slices of toast and put the rest of their scramble and sausage on them. Each had a tidy little breakfast sandwich and Harry thought that that was the most ingenious thing he had ever seen. Aunt Petunia would have yelled at him for something like that.

“Move!” Amy and Emily said at the same time to the other. They stared at each other before breaking down into giggles. They left the kitchen, calling good byes to everyone (including Harry) and he heard

a momentary squabble as the two pulled on their shoes and made it out the door.

“I’ll see you after work.” Lynn said as she leaned down and gave Leonard a kiss.

“Parents kissing.” Rick said. He shuddered. “Yuck.”

“Hush, you.” She said as she dropped a kiss on the top of Rick’s head. She mussed Harry’s hair as she walked by and wished him a good day. He returned the greeting and she left the house.

“Could be worse.” Sensei said as he wagged his eyebrows. Even Harry had to fight off shudders from the thought. Some things should not even be considered, student to teacher. Ack.

“No thanks.” Rick said as he finished his eggs. “I already know too much.” He moved to the sink and started hot water for dishes.

“Deshi? Finished?” Sensei asked a few minutes later as Harry stared at his food. Why did Rick insist on so much?

“Yes, Sensei.” Sensei looked over at his plate and rolled his eyes.

“Finish your scramble and toast.” Sensei told him. Harry watched as the man picked up his tea and ignored Harry’s glare. “Now, deshi.”

Harry wanted to grumble, but decided that grumbling would not be good for his continued existence in the Muggle world. He managed to finish most of Sensei’s orders and shrugged when the man looked at him with a raised eyebrow. Sensei nodded and Harry got up from the table.

“Here, Evan. Let me take that.” Rick told Harry, snatching the plate out of his hands.

“Class at eleven.” Sensei told Rick.

“Yes, Dad. I’ve got it. Evan, I hope you’re alive when I come home tonight.” Rick said with a grin.

“What?” Harry asked in confusion. What in the world was going on?

“Deshi, follow me.” Sensei said from the hallway. Rick waved goodbye to Harry. Harry shook his head and entered the hallway with a vague sense of foreboding. “Shoes.” Sensei said, holding out Harry’s trainers. Harry pulled them on and followed Harry outside to the training hall. “Shoes.” Harry kicked them off before entering the floor. “Socks.” Sensei threw over his shoulder as he walked to a corner containing some mats.

Harry bent down and pulled off his socks. He slid them into his shoes and was surprised to find that Sensei had spread out several layers of mats onto the floors. “Tatami will cushion falls.” Sensei told Harry shortly. What falls?

“Here.” Sensei waved Harry over to him. Harry stepped forward and stopped in front of his teacher. “Now, try to land on your feet, hmm?” Harry only had that as a warning when Sensei grabbed his gi top. Harry felt his feet leave the floor. He landed a second later, flat on his back and gasping for air. “Have you forgotten what I taught?”

“No, Sensei.” Harry croaked out as he pushed himself to a sitting position and coughed. Getting air knocked out of him was always an experience.

“Again, then.” Sensei said as he gave Harry a hand up and pulled him to the edge of the mats again. Harry nodded and he moved with Sensei that time. He twisted himself and while he didn’t land on his feet, he didn’t land on his back either. “Again.”

What followed that single word was a three hour session of falling. Harry didn’t notice that he was starting to fall less and landing more. Harry stood from his spot on the floor and stepped in front of Sensei again. “Deshi. Your blades.”

Harry stepped back and flexed his arm to retrieve one of his throwing blades. Harry was surprised that Paul had yet to catch him with them. It seemed that absolutely no one knew about them. "Target on that wall. Twenty times and call them back." Harry nodded and started his target practice.

Harry's mind fell into that place it always did when he worked out now. He was calm and centered. His worries about Fudge, Dumbledore, and Voldemort were all pushed aside and he could only see the target in front of him, the cool black of his blades as they hit the target, and Sensei prowling in the background. Nothing else mattered.

Harry felt something grab his gi and toss him into the air. One of Harry's blades came into his hands and he released it in the direction of his assailant as his feet found the floor. He stopped in shock a second later as he saw Sensei snatch the blade out of the air inches from his face. "Good, deshi." Sensei said as Harry's knees suddenly felt weak. He lowered himself to the ground and rested his head on his knees. Sensei flipped the blade over in his hand and presented the weapon handle first to Harry.

Harry looked up at him but didn't take the offered weapon. "I almost killed you." Harry said as he felt shaking start in the very center of his body. "If you hadn't caught that..." Harry trailed off as he realized the odd feeling of panic attack coming on. He closed his eyes and started the breathing exercise Paul had drilled into his head.

"You did not." Sensei told Harry. Harry gripped the legs of his uniform and fought to control his breathing. The familiar cold was back and nipped at Harry's ears. "Calm, deshi." Sensei said as he knelt next to Harry. "I am alive. You did well." The cold continued to descend. Sensei looked around as fog started forming in the slightly humid training hall. "Release it, deshi." Sensei said in a calm voice. "Release it."

Harry had no idea what Sensei meant by 'release it'. Was it his magic? He took another breath and stretched his magic the slightest bit. It rushed through him again and into his fingertips and the space behind his eyes. It questioned what he wanted, what he needed, what he desired. Harry gave the vaguest thought of 'clean' to it and felt a

sensation close to Madame Pomfrey's cleaning spells wash over him and out in the hall. He shuddered as the spell ended and breathed out.

"Deshi, look at me." Sensei ordered. Harry waited a few seconds before opening his eyes and looking up at Sensei. "You did exactly what I wanted. I am fine. You could not have hurt me if you wanted to. I know what you do before you do it." Sensei reached out and smoothed Harry's hair. "Fine, deshi. We're both fine. Time for a shower, I think." Sensei said as he stood and pulled Harry up with him. "Call your weapons." Sensei said as he wrapped an arm around Harry.

Harry reached out a hand to catch the blades as they flew back to him. He slid each one into its sheath and pulled his sleeve down over them. Both stopped to pull on their socks and shoes before returning to the house. Sensei sent Harry upstairs with a firm order of a long shower and a nap before returning downstairs. Like any self-respecting teenager would nap!

The shower was bliss for his sore muscles and fatigued brain. It seemed like Sensei was determined to get in as much training as possible while Harry was at his house. Harry didn't mind. Not at all. Did it have to be so painful? Harry stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around him. He padded across the hall to his room and looked for some clothing. Where were his clothes? He pulled open the dresser and noticed everything but a pair of pajamas had disappeared. What in the world? One word came to mind. Sensei.

Harry pulled on the pajamas and set out to look for his teacher. He reached the bottom of the stairs and listened for clues. A voice from directly behind him made him jump. "No nap, deshi?" Harry whirled around with his heart in his throat.

"I was just..." Harry had no idea what to say to the man.

"Stalling?" Sensei said as he folded his arms and glared down at Harry. "Upstairs and nap. Clothes will be returned after you nap." So, Sensei had made off with Harry's clothes. That...traitor.

“Fine.” Harry said, rolling his eyes as he walked by his teacher. The man cuffed Harry on the back of his head for the comment.

“I will wake you, deshi.” Sensei told the boy before Harry closed his door. Harry grumbled to himself and got into bed. If anyone at Hogwarts ever heard about this...his life would be over. He could almost see the newspaper headlines now. Harry fought down a groan and buried his face in the pillow.

Someone was petting his head. Again. Harry fought his way up from dreamland and opened his eyes to make out a blurry figure sitting next to his bed. “Nt Tunia?” He mumbled, not quite awake yet.

“Good afternoon, Harry.” She said with a slight chuckle. “Would you like your glasses?” She asked. Harry nodded and held out his hand. He preferred his contacts to his glasses, but this would get him up quicker than having to stop to put them in. Petunia handed him his glasses and waited for him to wake up. “Remus and I are both here, Harry. We need to talk to you about a few things. Sensei sent these up.” She placed a heavy bundle on his lap. Oh, clothing. “Do I want to know why he’s holding your clothes hostage?”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know.” Harry told her. “I don’t think you want to know, either.” He said with a shrug. He reached up to start unbuttoning his shirt, but stopped and looked at his aunt. “Privacy?” He asked.

“I’ve seen it all before, you know.” She said as she stood up.

“I thought you promised to not embarrass me.” Harry commented as he kicked his blankets off.

“That was just in front of your friends.” She said as she slipped from the room. Hmm. Harry would have to bring up his and Petunia’s agreement at their next family meeting. She had to stop embarrassing him at all times. It was only fitting for him. He was a multi-millionaire and in control of a few homes. He was...not as

pompous as Snape thought, but he still had some weight, right? Note to self: find out how powerful you are from Remus.

Harry went downstairs and heard Remus' voice from the kitchen. He pushed open the door and found Remus, Petunia, and Sensei all sharing afternoon tea. "Deshi." Sensei said by way of greeting. "Tea." Harry nodded his thanks and sat down in his usual spot.

"Where's Lynn?" Harry asked. He was curious. He had a feeling she and Aunt Petunia would get along famously.

"Emiko has ballet. Miyo piano. I'm making dinner tonight before my class." His class? "You think the dojo is there for show? No."

Harry wanted to hit himself for being so...naïve. Of course Sensei would be teaching classes in his dojo. Why else would he have the building? Harry accepted the sandwich slid in front of him and turned to Remus.

"What's going on?" He asked intently between bites of the sandwich. He couldn't identify what was on the sandwich itself, but it was delicious. He devoured one and found another took its' place on the plate.

"I sent a message to Minister Fudge yesterday, directly after you were removed from St. Jude's. He has refused to even return my messages, saying that he would only deal directly with Dumbledore, since Dumbledore is the one who 'hid you away'." Harry snorted at Remus' explanation and motioned for the man to continue. "Dumbledore has cloistered himself in his office and will see no one, especially not a 'tottery old werewolf' like myself." Remus explained further. "In other words, I have been blocked by all parties involved."

Harry chewed the last of his first sandwich and swallowed. "You mean no one will see you?" Harry asked in astonishment.

"No one at all. Severus told me that Albus ignores even him." Harry checked to make sure that his jaw was not brushing the ground.

Dumbledore never ignored Snape. He trusted the man too much and always took everything Snape said as truth, no matter of the reality.

“I find my hands tied as well, Harry.” Petunia told him. “I have sent several messages to Dumbledore. All of them were returned, unopened, to the house.” She shrugged. “I guess I have fallen out of favor.”

“Deshi? What is the name of the man who threatens you?” Sensei broke in.

“Voldemort.” Harry answered absently. “Neither of you can do anything, can you?” Harry asked. “Not when they’re ignoring you.” Harry said, falling thoughtful at the end of his sentence.

“I’m sorry, Harry. We tried.” Remus told him, but Harry waved the apology off.

“It’s not your fault.” Harry told him. “It’s theirs for not realizing exactly who they’re up against. How powerful would you say my family name is, Remus?” Harry asked as his mind hastily concocted a Plan B.

“I’d say almost as influential as the Malfoys in the Ministry, or what their influence used to be, at any rate. More so in certain circles, less so in others.” Remus explained. “Dare I ask why?”

“So my name itself holds some weight?” Harry asked, trying to clarify what Remus meant.

“You alone would stop traffic, Harry.” Remus saw the plotting look on Harry’s face and frowned. “No! Don’t even think about it.”

Petunia looked between Remus and Harry and figured out what the two were talking about. “No, Harry.”

“It could work!” Harry protested. “It could work if you come with me, Aunt Petunia. The wizarding world is kind of crazy where children are concerned. No one would try to take me to Hogwarts for ‘my own good’ if you are with me. Remus, this would not be a good time to

reveal you. If they think that I'm stuck in the Muggle world, alone, they might try to pull something like 'Operation Rescue Potter' bigger than what happened as St. Jude's. I'd rather keep you as my trump card." Harry explained. "Fudge won't dare refuse to see me if I show up at the Ministry looking for him." Harry reasoned. "I can say my piece, tell him that I'm staying away from Hogwarts of my own free will, and that will be that. He'll have to call off the Aurors." Harry said with an air of satisfaction. So, this was what Hermione felt when she was right.

"What if he doesn't?" Remus argued. "Fudge can be persistent, Harry. More than your life at St. Jude's will allow. Your picture is still being played on television, you know." Remus reached out and held onto Harry's shoulder. "We just want to keep you safe."

"Yes, I know and I appreciate that." Harry said. He knew that Remus and Aunt Petunia cared for him. "I think I can handle Fudge. I have other methods to convince Fudge if he decides that he doesn't want to cooperate with me." Harry picked up his second sandwich and took a bite. "What is in these?" He asked the kitchen.

"Tofu and herbs." Sensei said quickly. Harry dropped the sandwich and stared at his teacher. Tofu? What was that? "Deshi's plan, while a little shaky, could work."

"Tofu?" Harry asked in confusion. That sounded vaguely familiar. Vaguely.

"I don't see how." Remus argued.

"He needs a bodyguard." Sensei said. "Discourage enthusiastic people; make sure he gets out safely."

"Tofu?" Harry asked again. "What's tofu?" Harry wondered.

"Bean curd." Petunia told him quickly. "What about their magic?" Petunia asked Sensei.

"Bean curd?" Harry asked. What in the world was that? Were they avoiding his questions for fun?

“Deshi has tricks he can do.” Sensei said with a smirk. “Most will not notice his little tricks. Also, they will have to hope that I am no longer standing when they become too tired to work their magic.”

“DESHI is sitting here.” Harry said, a little upset at having his guardians talk around him in such a fashion. “Before we go any further, I want to know what bean curd is exactly.” Harry demanded. Sensei explained it to him with a smile and Harry fought the urge to scrape off his tongue. He had liked it before he knew what it was. He made a mental note to look it up once he got back to school. Did Paul know about it? “Okay, second, please don’t talk about me as if I weren’t here. Dumbledore does that a lot and I hate it.” Harry told them.

“Sorry, Harry. We got a little excited.” Remus told him.

“We’ll remember in the future.” Petunia said, smoothing down his hair. Oh, she had about ten years to stop that. Harry resisted closing his eyes and returned his attention to the matter at hand. He looked at his teacher for confirmation.

Sensei only raised an eyebrow and tilted his head. Harry knew what that meant and smiled. Sensei would not forget.

“Do you think that this plan can work? It looks like our only recourse.” Harry told them.

“I agree with you.” Remus said. “Now that I’ve thought it through, I think it is a very good idea.” Harry smiled at Remus and turned to Petunia.

“I would like to meet this Fudge character. Let him know exactly what I think of him.” Harry wondered what the strange gleam in her eyes meant. He had a feeling it was more than what she thought of Fudge. Harry almost felt sorry for the Minister. Almost.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do.” Harry said as he got a pad of paper and a pen from a stand. He started making an outline. It was

time for him to tell the rest of the wizarding world that they deserved nothing from him. They had no reason to expect his every moment to be published for their perusal. He had a right to privacy! They could not have all of him!

Author's Note: Okay, questions go to the forums (click on my author's name and then on my forums). I hope you all liked it. Next chapter: a visit to the wizarding world!

Author's Note: Okay, so this is the third version of the chapter here. I've cut about thirty pages of material to get this chapter. I hope you all enjoy it.

Harry watched the passing London traffic and relaxed against the seat in the car. His head bobbed in time with the music playing on his CD player. Hermione's taste in music was certainly eclectic. She had introduced a bit of everything, from punk to classical, and Harry was listening to his current favorite of Enya. Some of the songs made him relax into a semi-drowsy state and Paul was quick to include the music as a part of the sessions with his aunt. The strange thing was that Harry had liked the addition. His feelings for his aunt were constantly changing and Harry was not upset at all. He wasn't sure why.

He saw the familiar streets pass and he took several deep calming breaths. He would be fine. Sensei was sitting in the front seat with his aunt and would help protect him. Aunt Petunia was ready to tear Fudge to tiny little pieces and Harry was sure she would given the slightest sign that Fudge meant Harry any ill will. Harry almost hoped Fudge would do something like that, just to see what Aunt Petunia would do. Bad thoughts, Harry.

Petunia parked the car according to Harry's instructions and Harry released his seat belt. "Here we go." Harry mumbled to himself.

"Let me go first, deshi." Sensei said as he opened his door. Sensei had shocked Harry beyond all else first thing this morning after their run. The shocking event changed Harry's outlook about his teacher again.

"Deshi." Sensei called him from the hallway. Harry excused himself from the two women and joined Sensei in the kitchen. "Something for you." Sensei said. "For your stick." How had Sensei known about his wand?

"Thank you." Harry said as Sensei presented something made out of leather. It had the same catch on it as his throwing knives.

“Roll your sleeve up.” Harry took off his jacket and undid the button. His little sheath of knives was on his wrist. “Remove those.” Harry nodded and Sensei helped him to strap on the new accessory. Harry took his wand out and slid it home in the holster. “Good.” Sensei said. “It fits.”

“Thank you, Sensei. This will make life a bit easier.” Harry flexed his arm in the same way as when he wanted a knife and his wand slid into his hand, ready to be used. Wicked. Harry looked at the little sheath of throwing knives for a second before Sensei reached out and took them from him. A few quick motions attached the sheath to the holster and Harry smiled. Was it wrong to feel so comfortable with Muggle weapons in addition to his wand?

“There you two are.” Petunia said from the hallway. Harry pulled down his sleeve before he turned around. “Are you ready?” She asked. Harry summoned his robe with one hand while he shrugged into his jacket.

“I’m ready.” Harry told her. “What did you mean by ‘two’?” Harry asked. He turned as Sensei tapped him on the shoulder. He stopped and considered what Sensei was wearing.

“My career as bodyguard has been revived.” Sensei said simply.

“Huh?” Harry realized that eloquence was not a big thing right now.

“I was a bodyguard for many years before a teacher.” Sensei said simply. “Where did you think I learned it?” The two sentences convinced Harry that Sensei spoke in broken sentences when it served a purpose and no other reason. Harry watched as Sensei wanted over to a cabinet and pressed a spot in the wood. It swung open and Harry’s eyes bugged out. Sensei calmly loaded a gun and slid it into his own holster before taking a card out and sliding it into his pocket.

“Sensei, you don’t have to come with us. I’ll be just fine with Aunt Petunia.” Harry told him.

“You are in my hands, deshi.” Sensei told Harry. He would listen to no further arguments. He dropped a kiss on Lynn’s cheek and led the way to the door. Harry wondered if a gun was able to work around magic. It was just a simple matter of physics, right? Nothing too technologically advanced, right? Harry slipped on his shoes and hung his robe over his arm until they made it to the car. Harry grumbled as Sensei forced him into the backseat. He hated the backseat. Bodyguard. Why did Harry’s life have to be so complicated? Sensei stood outside the car and looked around before motioning Harry out of the car. Harry opened his door and stood. Sensei nodded and placed a hand on Harry’s shoulder. Harry could only imagine what Snape would say if he heard that Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, needed a Muggle bodyguard. He cringed. That would not be a pleasant conversation.

“There you are.” Paul said from behind them. “Relax. Zen sends his greetings.” Paul told them with a smirk. “I feel like I’m James Bond now.” Harry rolled his eyes at Paul. “Hey, double-O seven. Ready to go?”

“I’m nervous.” Harry said honestly. “I know nothing is likely to happen, but...” He trailed off and shrugged.

“I understand.” Paul dug into his pocket and produced a small vial. “Remus gave this to me when he stopped by yesterday.” Paul told him.

“Are you sure it was Remus?” Harry questioned.

“He knew all of your safety words and could tell me my entire ‘I’ll hurt you if you hurt Harry’ speech from when we first met.” Paul said with a smile. “Yes, I’m sure it was Remus.”

“What is it?” Harry asked. He pointed at the vial in curiosity.

“A calming draught. Or that’s what he called it, anyway.” Paul said. Harry wanted to hit himself. Of course it was a calming draught. He

should have recognized it from the amount of time he had spent in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts.

“Keep it for now.” Harry said. “I might really need it later.” Harry took a few deep breaths and then realized something odd. “Wait a minute.” He said, looking back and forth between Paul and Sensei. “Why are you here?” He asked. “And why are the two of you dressed alike?”

“Ah.” Paul said as he gave a quick look to Sensei. “Harry, did I ever tell you why I decided to go to university?” Harry shook his head and Paul looked a bit sheepish. “Well, Sensei and I met through bodyguard training about fifteen years ago. He was my physical defense teacher. It’s what I did before I became a therapist.”

“You’re telling me that you worked as a bodyguard and risked your life to protect others?” Harry asked with a hint of incredulity in his words. “That’s a little too much coincidence for me.” Harry folded his arms. “I feel like I’m living in a bloody conspiracy.” He growled.

“Language.” His aunt said sharply. Harry looked at her and dropped his eyes.

“Sorry, Aunt Petunia.” Harry said. “But, I still don’t believe it.” Harry said with a scowl.

“So I felt like a career change ten years ago and went to university.” Paul shrugged. “I’m telling you the truth.” He promised.

“Okay, Paul. I guess I’m just out of sorts.” Harry said. “I don’t want to be here.” Harry told him.

“I understand, buddy. Anyway, Sensei and I are here to intimidate anyone who tries to hurt you.”

“But you’re Muggles!” Harry’s voice broke. This was going to be too much. Harry wasn’t sure if he could handle it. Playing games with the Dark Lord, yes. Meeting the Minister of Magic, no. “You can’t do anything against spells!” Harry said as his breath caught in his throat.

He choked on it and coughed. His throat closed and he gasped for air. Oh, no. Not another panic attack.

“Harry! Breathe, buddy.” Paul talked Harry through his breathing exercise and held onto Harry’s hands. The physical contact seemed to help Harry. “You’re okay and no one is going to get hurt today. Sensei and I are just precautions. That’s all.” Paul watched as reason asserted itself over the panic in Harry’s eyes. “Okay?”

“Yes.” Harry answered tiredly. “Let’s get this over with.” He said as he stepped away from Paul. Harry jumped as his aunt pulled him into her arms.

“No one is going to hurt you, Sensei, or Paul.” She told him. Harry rested his head on her shoulder and sighed. “I won’t let them. The magical world hasn’t seen anything yet. They think Voldemort is something to be afraid of? Ha. They haven’t met me yet.”

Harry’s lips twitched and he smothered his laugh. It wasn’t appropriate to laugh now, was it? He looked at Aunt Petunia and saw her in Voldemort’s robes. His lips twitched again as he pulled away from her. He snorted and then laughed as the image continued to become one of Aunt Petunia sitting in an armchair and the Death Eaters on their knees around her. “I don’t know what you said to him, but it worked.” Paul said as Harry started walking out of the car park.

“Oh, nothing.” Petunia said airily. Harry snorted and laughed again. That image would be dangerous later. He wouldn’t want to descend into laughter in the Minister’s office. That would not be the image he wanted to project to the leader of the magical world.

Speaking of images...Harry touched one of his eyebrows. Rick had helped Harry with his hair this morning and had done a surprising thing that had rather impressive results. Harry had experienced the agony of eyebrow tweezing.

It had been that morning directly after Harry’s shower. The shower had felt wonderful on slightly sore muscles and a few vague injuries from Harry’s dream that night. Not that he wanted to think about that.

“Your aunt is here.” Sensei told him as he entered Harry’s room. “She brought you a suit and a...robe.” Sensei presented the suit to Harry and placed a folded robe on the bed next to Harry. Harry was surprised to see that Aunt Petunia remembered that he would need a robe today. “Your dress shoes are downstairs. Rick wants to help with your hair.”

“Oh, no. I’ll never leave the bathroom again.” Harry commented. Sensei smiled at the sentence.

“You will if you take much longer to get dressed.” Rick snapped from the hallway. “Hurry up, Evan!”

“Coming. Keep your shirt on!” Sensei left the room and shut the door behind him. Harry pulled on the suit and thought it looked unfinished without the shoes. He stepped out into the hallway and Rick snatched Harry’s arm and led him to the bathroom.

“We’ve got to get it finished before it dries. Sit!” Okay, the ordering thing was not genetic, but it was still annoying. How did the father/son pair manage to sound exactly the same? Harry submitted to Rick’s fanatical hair styling frenzy. “Dad says you have a meeting with some bigwig to get your name off the news.”

“Yes. He already knows me, fortunately, so it shouldn’t be too hard to convince him that whoever reported my name to the news was extremely mistaken.” Harry said. Rick made a noise above him as he pulled out a hair dryer. Harry closed his eyes against the hot air and made a mental note to switch from his contacts to his glasses. He wanted to appear as wizardly as possible and glasses were one of his trademarks.

“Hold still.” Rick said as he rested a hand on Harry’s forehead. Harry felt something metal settle on his eyebrow before intense pain assaulted his senses.

“Ow!” Harry snapped. He pushed Rick’s hands away and reached up a hand to rub at the sore spot. “What did you do to me?” Harry demanded. He took away his hand to check for blood.

“I was only tweezing some stray hairs. This will give your eyebrows a bit more definition.” Rick explained in a calm voice. He tilted Harry’s head back and tweezed a few more hairs away before Harry had a chance to protest.

“Ow! Rick! Stop!” Harry was sure he could hear someone stifling their laughter just outside the door. “What are you, a girl in disguise?” He batted at Rick’s hands and attempted to stand.

“No, don’t be silly.” Rick just nudged Harry back to his seat. “Stay still; I’m almost done.” Rick told him.

“This is torture.” Harry complained.

“You’ll thank me when I’m done.” Rick said with a smirk. Harry only rolled his eyes and let Rick get on with it. Two painful minutes later, Rick allowed Harry to stand. “Look at yourself in the mirror.” Harry turned to the mirror and turned his face from side to side. The change was subtle. His face looked older, somehow. More mature. His hair was calm and it looked like he had been to a salon to style it. Now Harry knew how Hermione had felt during the Yule ball. He was going to turn some heads with the suit, his hair, and the eyebrows. It was exactly the image Harry wanted to project at the Ministry today. “I’m waiting.” Rick said with a grin.

“Okay, okay. Thanks, Rick. It makes me look older.” Harry told him. He reached up on reflex to smooth back his hair, only to be stopped by Rick. “Sorry. I’ll try not to touch the hair. Thanks again.”

“Get going. Dad’s waiting. Good luck today.” Rick said as he pulled towels out of the linen closet.

“Thanks.” Harry left the bathroom and went downstairs.

“He had one of his dreams last night.” Sensei’s voice broke Harry out of his thoughts and Harry frowned.

“Are you okay, Harry?” Paul asked.

“One of those vision dreams?” Petunia said before Harry could answer Paul.

“I’m fine.” Harry said. Sensei snorted a second later. “Really. I’ll live. It was bad, but it could have been worse.” Harry assured Paul and Petunia.

“Talk about this later.” Sensei said firmly. “Now, we must focus on our task ahead.” The group fell silent as Harry led them towards the street with the empty department store. Harry thought about his “dream”, as Sensei called it. It had been bad. Very bad. What was worse was that Sensei had seen the aftermath of it all. Sensei had not been pleased.

Voldemort had been easy to deal with in the beginning. It was when Harry started to lose control of his magic that things started to go pear-shaped. Voldemort, Harry had learned, did not have the patience of a saint and loathed being disobeyed, voluntarily or involuntarily. Voldemort’s words still sounded in Harry’s ears, even in the light of day. My student.

The dream with Voldemort started as it always did without any kind of warning. Harry tensed as he felt familiar surroundings settle around him. He was in Voldemort’s room again. He could hear the fire crackling in the grate and the soft tinkling that came when Voldemort was stirring his tea. Strange to think that the Dark Lord enjoyed a good cup of tea. Harry allowed his eyes to flutter open, as though he was just waking up, before he acknowledged the other man’s presence. “Sir.” Harry said as he sat up.

“It looks like you escaped the sleeping pills this evening.” Voldemort said as he sipped his tea. Harry stood and went over to his own chair. Voldemort waved to the tea tray and Harry picked up his own cup.

“I feel asleep before they brought me the pills. I can’t manage it often, but they’ll leave me alone if I’m sleeping peacefully.” Harry said.

“Make sure you ‘manage’ it more often.” Voldemort told him firmly. Harry looked at Voldemort before dropping his eyes and nodding. He hoped he looked ashamed. It was difficult to tell when he wasn’t watching Voldemort’s reactions. “You are a good student, Harry. You are very talented, but that talent will be going to waste if you do not practice regularly and that is something I refuse to tolerate. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry wondered if this performance would qualify for an award of some type. Perhaps the “Fool the Man Trying to Kill You” award. Yes, that would be fun. “I’ll figure something out.” He promised.

Voldemort nodded before finishing his tea. “Wand out.” He told Harry as he put his cup aside. “Levitate the cup. Make sure you do not break it.”

Harry nodded and took his wand out. Levitating the cup should be easy. Harry focused and swished his wand. He smiled a bit as the cup started up. He held it there. Harry would never leave this room again if Voldemort ever figured out that levitation was easier for Harry if it was wandless magic. He felt his magic spike just then and the cup wobbled. “That should not be happening.” Voldemort said.

“Yes, sir.” Harry steadied the cup and returned his concentration to his task. This was rather easy. He could do this all day if need be. Granted, he wouldn’t want to, because Voldemort was never a pleasant companion, but he could. His magic spiked again, worse than the last time and the spell cancelled. Harry’s hand shot out and he caught the cup before it could break. He thanked the powers that be for Seeker reflexes. And Sensei’s training.

“Do you think you can explain that?” Voldemort said as he own wand appeared in his hand. Harry swallowed and placed the cup back on the tray, knowing he only had five seconds to answer before Voldemort ‘corrected’ him.

“It felt like my magic spiked, but worse.” Harry told him in hopes that the man would accept the answer and leave him alone. Harry hissed

as he felt two quick stings across his chest. Sensei was not going to like that.

“You are past the stage where your magic can spike. Try again.” Voldemort said dangerously. Harry cast about for something to say. What could he say? His magic was out of his control? His magic wouldn’t listen to him anymore? He was better wandless? No. “Nothing to say, Harry?” Voldemort’s voice sounded concerned. That only made him more dangerous.

“I’m afraid I don’t have an explanation, sir. I’m not sure-“ Harry fell back in his chair as the Cruciatus curse hit him. He felt a vague sensation like he had felt with Bleys, a need to end the spell by pushing it off, but he resisted. That was a skill the Dark Lord did not need to know about, if it was a skill at all. The curse ended and Harry allowed himself to collapse into the chair.

“You are going to have to try better than that.” Voldemort told him. Harry jerked as he sent another two lashes at the boy. “Now, let us see how you are doing with your power control.” Voldemort said as he stood.

Harry leapt to his feet and only wobbled for a minute. That was surprising. His recovery time was getting much better from these curses. Sensei would not like that either. “Stance.” Voldemort warned. Harry fixed his position quickly before Voldemort could ‘correct’ it. Harry felt a mild sting on the inside of his knees. Yeah, that would remind him to keep his feet apart. Ouch. “Now, go up through the different power levels you have mastered. Start with the lowest and work your way up. Expelliarmus only.” Harry nodded and locked his arm.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry only pushed a bit of power through his wand and was surprised to find his target already a bright white. Four quick stings landed across his back.

“I said to start at the bottom.” Voldemort said slowly. “Are you hard of hearing?” He asked Harry, ready to raise his wand to further correct his student.

“No, sir.” Harry said, staring at the target. “I don’t have an explanation for it.” Four more quick stings landed on Harry’s back and he gritted his teeth.

“You should have an explanation for it!” Voldemort snapped. Harry felt several more lashes appear on his back and his knees buckled. He caught himself and took a deep breath before standing again. He fought back tears and breathed the best he could. “Now, do it correctly.” Voldemort ordered.

Harry raised his wand at the target and thought of the disarming spell instead of saying it. He was relieved to find the spell start at the lowest setting. He took a breath and released it before turning to Voldemort.

The Dark Lord was eyeing him with an odd look. It was...calculating. “I think,” He said, sounding more satisfied than Harry had ever heard him before, “that we have found the reason for your erratic performance.” No, really? “You are a natural wordless caster.”

“Pardon?” Harry asked.

“A natural wordless caster. You are able to cast spells better without saying the words than you are with saying the words. You should have figured that out on your own.” Harry wanted to tell the man exactly what he thought about that, especially since he had just lashed Harry, but refrained for reasons of his own continued existence. This was a desperate game and Harry wanted to see it to the end. “I will expect all of your spells to be wordless from now on. You will be corrected if you do not follow my directions.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry answered. Anything to make his life easier. Using words was too much trouble nowadays. Bleyes had not allowed words to be used with the wandless magic. He said that words, like wands, were nothing more than crutches for lazy wizards. Harry had not really needed words for some time. Two quick stings brought Harry out of his thoughts.

“You should really pay attention to me when I am speaking, my student. You never know what interesting things I have to tell you.” Voldemort said. He raised an eyebrow at Harry.

“I’m sorry, sir. I was surprised that you think I’m ready to continue magic without saying the spells.” Harry told him. That was partially true. He was surprised that Voldemort would think him powerful enough to cast all of his spells without the words. He was trying to present the opposite, that he was nothing special and should not be considered a threat. Why did his talents always work against him?

Voldemort eyed him, as though he was questioning what Harry had said. He shrugged and looked back at the target. “Do it again.” He told Harry. Harry raised his wand and looked at the target. He focused and released his spell. He sighed in relief as the spell glowed a bright green. It was only a bit brighter than the last one. “Very good.” Voldemort praised. Harry fought down a shudder. There was just something wrong with the bad guy praising the good guy. It was almost disturbing.

The lesson continued all the way through until Harry’s target color was the bright white he had first accomplished with the spoken spell. Voldemort called a halt then and Harry lowered his wand, grateful for the reprieve. Bleys had never worked him this hard and Sensei never truly worked Harry until exhaustion, but only until sore and tired. This was so far beyond sore and tired that Harry thought he was seeing double. He looked at his wand and saw two. That wasn’t right. Okay, he was seeing double. Great.

“I have been thinking.” Voldemort said in a master of the universe way. Voldemort thinking always produced problems for Harry. “I think that it is time you and I met in more...adequate surroundings.” Harry looked at Voldemort for a few seconds before blinking.

“More adequate surroundings, sir?” He asked. His brain was fighting hard to keep up with Voldemort, but there was only so much he could do.

“Yes.” Well, that answer helped a whole lot. “I think it is time for you to come to me at night. Train face to face and not in our minds.” Voldemort said simply as he conjured two chairs. He took hold of Harry’s elbow and steered him into the chair. Harry took care in sitting at this point, careful of his back and chest.

“To you at night?” Harry asked. Alright, his brain was really, really slow. He was a teenager, he was sleep-deprived, and he had been tortured. He was in a bad way and only wanted to sleep.

“Yes. I’ll send you a portkey to use.” Voldemort said. “It will not be difficult. My bird can find anyone, anywhere, no matter what wards surround them.” Voldemort told Harry. “I’ll send one in the morning.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea, sir.” Harry knew as soon as the words left his mouth that it was the wrong thing to say. Voldemort’s wand appeared in his hand and Harry felt the lashes increase by five. A Cruciatus curse followed and Harry ended curled on the floor in agony. The lashes burned with the salt-in-the-wound feeling like before and turned to fire the longer Voldemort held the curse. Harry felt a familiar presence in his head and the pain started to recede even though Voldemort continued to hold it. Who was that? Bleys?

“I trust that you will not question my judgment again, child.” Voldemort’s acerbic voice brought Harry out of his daze. Harry lay on the floor, unable to identify exactly when he had fallen from his chair, twitching from the spell. His muscles were in spasms and his breath hitched as he fought to control it.

“No, sir.” Harry gasped out through his spasms. His throat hurt. Had he been screaming? He tried to move and failed. Oh, he hurt! He silently prayed to any deity listening to allow his life to end at that moment. He hurt too much to go on with this. He hurt too much to continue. “It’s just-“ he trailed off, truly afraid to continue with this. Why did he choose this? This was too hard. He was afraid.

“Just what, child?” Voldemort demanded. Harry realized that the man was calling him a child. What happened to ‘young man’? “Speak up!” Voldemort demanded of Harry.

“The Death Eaters will kill me on sight.” Harry said in a rush. He was more afraid of Dumbledore’s spies finding him and returning him to Hogwarts before he could finish the game. He needed his freedom in order for this to work.

“Not if I order them not to.” Voldemort said lightly.

“What if Dumbledore gets a hold of one?” Harry asked frantically. He put a real bit of fear in his voice. “He is a Legillimens. He might be able to know that you are training me. I hesitate to think what he would do then.” Bravo, Harry! Bravo! Good excuse! Harry was impressed with himself. He could still think after being tortured. He deserved some ice cream for this, of the mint chocolate chip variety. Voldemort paused and looked Harry over.

“You truly detest the idea of Dumbledore finding you?” Voldemort asked him as Harry fought his way to a sitting position. Harry balanced himself against the chair and ignored his throbbing back the best he could.

He looked up at Voldemort and locked eyes with him. He opened his shields and brought up his feelings for Dumbledore. He felt Voldemort touch his mind lightly and Harry reaffirmed his feelings of current dislike for the headmaster. “Yes!” He hissed in Parseltongue. Voldemort’s eyes widened the slightest bit and Harry felt him withdraw from his mind.

“I shall send you a robe and a mask along with a portkey then. Expect it tomorrow evening.” Voldemort said in a calm voice. “You’ll be just another Death Eater and under Dumbledore’s notice. I look forward to seeing you in person, my student.”

Harry relaxed and his head fell backwards onto the seat of the chair. “Thank you.” He said sincerely. The last thing he needed was for Dumbledore to catch wind of Harry being a Death Eater. That would ruin all of Harry’s plans. Harry felt a sleeping spell hit him and he fell under its power. He sank back into the world of sleep.

Harry had woken up a few minutes later from the shaking. No one was shaking him. He was shaking on his own. Harry woke with Sensei holding onto his arms and Lynn standing beside the bed. He looked from one to the other and felt a remnant of the Cruciatus course through him. His body shook with the after effects of that curse. He had to fight out of Sensei's grasp to smother his cries in his pillow. He sat up slowly once he rode the effects out and had found Lynn standing there with a pale face. She pointed at his chest where a bit of blood had seeped through his pajama top. Harry was glad that only a speck of it had shown and he was able to pull the modesty card to get Lynn out of the room when Sensei had started to remove his shirt.

He reached out and unbuttoned Harry's pajama top. Why hadn't Harry opted for the T-shirt tonight? He pushed against Sensei's hands. "No fighting." Sensei snapped. Harry's hands fell to his sides and he just breathed as his teacher removed his top. Sensei sucked in air between his teeth at the marks littering Harry's chest. "Him again, deshi?" Sensei asked, looking over the marks on Harry's chest.

Harry glanced down at his chest. The marks were more than simple lashes. The Cruciatus Curse had inflamed them, making them appear twice as bad as they were. Sensei leaned over and investigated Harry's back. He 'tsked' at the more numerous marks there. "Bad, deshi. They are very bad." Sensei told him.

"Yes, Sensei." Harry rasped. Harry gasped as it felt like every one of his nerve endings lit on fire. He shuddered and recognized the feeling as a remnant of the Cruciatus curse. Sensei held Harry's hand as Harry worked through the spasm.

The look on Sensei's face when Harry's shirt finally left his shoulders was one that Harry would remember for the rest of his natural life. Sensei had then ordered, yes ordered, Harry to remove his pajama bottoms and wait in his pants for Sensei to return. Sensei had mumbled something about being sure that Harry was not marked in other places than his chest and back. It seemed that Sensei still did not trust him to admit to injuries. Harry did as ordered; Sensei was not a person to disobey when he was in a temper. Harry was sitting on the edge of his bed when Sensei returned carrying a bowl of water.

He pushed Harry back so that Harry was resting on his hands and his chest was free. "This cannot happen again, deshi." Sensei had said when he started to clean the welts left from Voldemort. "You can protect your mind from him. Do it." Sensei said, cleaning one welt none too gently. Harry hissed and pulled away from the rag. "Stay still." Sensei snapped. Harry meekly obeyed.

"Twenty-four." Sensei said some minutes later. Harry had been moved from his first position to a kneeling position on the floor with his head on his arms and his arms resting on the bed.

"Sorry?" Harry had been drifting in and out of sleep while Sensei took care of his cuts. He wasn't sure if he had heard Sensei correctly or if the number had come from that place between asleep and awake.

"Twenty-four welts." Sensei said. Harry had felt the bed tip dangerously and he clutched the blanket for support. Twenty-four? He had survived twenty-four welts and the Cruciatus? How had he managed that?

Sensei reached down and helped Harry back into a sitting position on the bed. He started to stand when the welts on the inside of Harry's knees from that mild stinging hex caught his attention. "Twenty-six." He ground out from between his teeth. Could Harry manage to run in his condition? He wanted to. He really wanted to. Sensei was scarier than Voldemort right now. "Stay still!" Sensei told Harry as he left the room again.

Harry had not moved a millimeter. Sensei returned just a few minutes later with a bowl in his hands. "This will sting." He warned Harry before reaching out with a finger. Sensei applied his strange cream to everyone one of Harry's welts and Harry wanted to tell Sensei he was mistaken. This cream of his did not sting. Oh, no. It burned. Harry was sure his skin was ready to separate from his bones. Anything would be better...

Those thoughts had stopped all at once as the burning died away and a pleasant numbness seeped through into Harry's muscles. Harry

was very nearly limp when Sensei had finished. "Into new pajamas." Sensei had said as he pulled out a T-shirt and sweatpants for Harry. What followed had to be the oddest experience Harry had ever had. Sensei had to dress Harry into his new pajamas. Harry had been unable to move due to the numbing effects of the cream. It was slightly embarrassing, but Harry had also never felt safer than at that moment. He knew Sensei would make sure that he was dressed, put back to bed, and protected from everything else.

Lynn arrived just a few seconds after Sensei had finished tucking Harry into bed. She carried a small mug with her. "I thought a bit of hot chocolate would help Evan get back to sleep." She said to Sensei. Sensei glanced at Harry and Harry had nodded. The hot chocolate had healing powers. Madame Pomfrey used it often enough in the hospital wing. Sensei had helped Harry drink the hot chocolate and then ordered him back to sleep. Harry had complied without protest. Harry reached the telephone box and picked up the receiver. "Harry, what are we doing here?" Petunia asked with an obvious tone of disbelief in her voice.

"Going to the Ministry of Magic." Harry said in a low tone. He reached out and punched 62442 on the keypad. The disembodied voice questioned their business at the Ministry of Magic. "Harry Potter, Petunia Dursley," He paused and looked at Sensei and Paul. Both shook their heads. "To see the Minister of Magic." Harry finished. If they wanted to act like they were invisible, so be it. Harry listened to the voice and heard the badges appear in the coin chute. He removed them and handed one to his Aunt Petunia as the telephone box started its downward ascent. He shrugged on his robe and pinned his badge to the front of it. "This will admit us to the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic." Harry told his aunt. "It's just like a lift." He reassured her. Paul and Sensei were both looking around. Harry noticed that they had unbuttoned their jackets. Were they both armed with guns?

Harry stood just inside the lift and looked around for possible threats. Magical people were going in and out of the fireplaces. The green flames of Floo powder lit the hall. Harry grinned as he remembered his first time with Floo powder. He didn't miss it. Paul and Sensei

maneuvered themselves so that Sensei was in front of Harry and Paul behind Aunt Petunia. Petunia moved up to stand next to Harry. "You ready?" She asked him as she patted her hair.

"Yes." He answered her as he took a deep breath. "Just don't kill Fudge before he agrees to end the hunt, okay?" Harry smirked at her.

"Agreed, Harry." She said. "Let's go meet this man." She gave Harry a smile and Harry stepped out of the lift. He set a fast clip of a walk towards the security booth. People ignored them. Harry had found that if he kept his eyes on the ground and he walked as though he had somewhere to be at just that moment, people would ignore him. Sensei and Paul were looking out for him. He figured he didn't need to scan his surroundings constantly beyond glancing around.

"What happened to that?" Petunia asked in a low voice as they passed the Fountain of Magical Brethren. It was back together, but still held evidence of being in the path of a duel.

"Ah, that. Long story." Harry said in a quiet voice. "Really long story. There were some curses involved. Ask me again sometime." Harry told her. He fell silent as he stepped up to the security booth.

"Name?" The guard asked in a bored tone. Harry had to wonder about security here. Voldemort could just waltz in and no one would be the wiser.

"Harry Potter. This is my aunt, Petunia Dursley." Harry had the satisfaction of watching the man pale.

"Harry Potter?" The man gasped quietly. His eyes did the trademark flicker up to Harry's forehead.

"Yes. I'm afraid that I'm on a bit of a tight schedule. Can we move along, please?" Harry asked.

"Er, yes. Wand?" Harry flicked his hand and presented his wand to the man. The man scanned it and handed it back to Harry as he

rattled off the statistics. Harry nodded in agreement. "Wand?" He asked Petunia.

"She's a Muggle." Harry told him. "But my legal guardian. That's why she's here." He was ready to leave. Now.

"What about the other two?" The man asked.

"My bodyguards." Harry answered flatly. "Neither own wands." Harry told the man.

"Are they wizards or Muggles?" The man asked. Okay, Harry was starting to understand Voldemort's temper a little better. This was becoming tedious.

"They have knowledge of the wizarding world." Harry told him. "Are we finished?" Harry asked with thinning patience.

"Do you carry any weapons?" Harry wanted to scream. No, this security guard couldn't make it easy, could he? Paul and Sensei glanced at each other. Paul motioned for Sensei to go first.

Harry watched as Sensei started to disarm himself. Knives and throwing blades appeared from many different places. A sharp looking object appeared from his waist, briefly, before it was replaced with the same amount of speed. A long, thin wire of some kind came from one of Sensei's pockets. Was that piano wire? Sensei wouldn't carry that, would he? Sensei ended with a quick flash of his gun and stepped back.

"Right." The security guard looked dazed. "And you?" He asked Paul, sounding fearful of actually discovering that Paul carried similar weapons. Paul stepped forward, gave the man a smile meant to comfort, but found it didn't work. Paul pulled out several items similar to Sensei's own before producing something even Harry didn't recognize. "What's those?" The man asked. Even Harry cringed at the sentence.

“Small flash and smokes.” Paul said. “Completely harmless, really. They create a distraction just long enough to get our charge out of harm’s way.” Paul said.

“Flash and smokes?” The man questioned. Did this security guard ever stop?

“They create a flash of bright light before a smoke screen develops.” Paul told him. “I can’t demonstrate it here, but they are harmless and used for defensive purposes only.” Paul pocketed them and opened his jacket to reveal his gun. He stepped back then and smiled at the guard.

“Alright.” The guard said. Harry smirked to himself. “You’re here to see the Minister?”

“Yes. Where is his office?” Harry asked. He listened closely to the directions and then thanked the guard for his helpfulness. Harry left the man, who was mumbling to himself about weird Muggles and their contraptions. Sensei positioned himself to the front of the group and followed Harry’s whispered directions to the elevators.

“Harry, dear. Why are there paper airplanes flying everywhere?” Aunt Petunia’s voice sounded strained.

“They’re memos going from one office to another. Like email.” Harry tried to explain. Bug had introduced Harry to the concept of email and Harry was still deciding on whether or not he liked it. Aunt Petunia nodded absently.

“These look more fun than email.” Paul said as one paper airplane dodged him. It was screaming “urgent” at the top of its lungs.

“Yes, they are.” Harry stepped into the lift and hit the appropriate button for the Minister’s office. He waited patiently and hummed a bit under his breath. He disliked lifts and preferred stairs. He could see where he was going then and didn’t have to worry about who was lurking on the other side.

“Calm, deshi.” Sensei’s voice broke through his thoughts. “Breathe deeply and calm.” Harry nodded and followed his teacher’s instructions. He was always surprised that just deep breathing could calm him as efficiently as a calming draught. The doors opened and Harry looked around. No wonder Fudge didn’t want to lose his job!

The office itself wasn’t seen yet. There was a huge entryway. The walls were very high, around twelve feet or so. The windows themselves were charmed to present a perfect spring day. Harry knew it was cloudy and overcast outside. Fudge was very lucky. The walls themselves were decorated with the portraits of past Ministers. Sensei stepped out of the lift and looked around for a threat before motioning the rest of the group out.

Sensei allowed Harry to go in the lead at that point, but insisted on walking next to him. Harry didn’t mind. He’d prefer to have some protection when Fudge went into his “hero-worship” mode. The long walk stopped at two large doors, just as tall as the walls, and a desk at which sat a familiar looking figure. “Hi, Percy!” Harry greeted. “Oh, sorry.” He said, seeing the name plate on the desk. “Mr. Weasley.” He corrected himself. “Is the Minister in his office?”

Percy Weasley looked at the group in front of his desk and lost the ability to speak. He nodded dumbly at Harry and just stared.

“Thanks!” Harry said brightly. He turned and went to the doors. He opened the pair of them and walked into the office. Fudge was sitting a desk with a harassed look on his face. He was surrounded by stacks of parchment and paper airplanes landed on his desk with only five second intervals between each. Umbridge sat next to the desk, looking just as harassed as Fudge and twice as ugly. Harry’s hand tightened. He was more aware of the scars than ever.

“Harry Potter!” Fudge shrieked in the next instant as he leapt to his feet. He hurried out from behind the desk and came forward to greet Harry.

“Minister Fudge.” Harry returned. Harry smirked as Fudge was stopped by a rather menacing looking Sensei. “It’s alright.” He said in a low tone to Sensei. “He won’t hurt me.”

“Mr. Potter. Who are these, uh, people with you?” Fudge asked, motioning Harry to a small alcove in the office. It appeared to be a sitting area of sorts. A tea service appeared on a low table between Harry and Fudge. Harry made sure Aunt Petunia was seated before himself.

“Aunt Petunia, this is Cornelius Fudge, the Minister of Magic.” Harry started the introductions. “Minister Fudge, my aunt and guardian, Petunia Dursley.” Fudge shook Petunia’s hand with enthusiasm, telling her how relieved they were that Harry was alive and in good health.

“So, you’re the man sending those Auror people to my home.” She said sharply. Harry hid his smile. “Not appreciated, but it’s nice to meet you anyway.” She gave Fudge an appraising look. “Harry’s told me a lot about you.” She said and smiled at Fudge. Fudge looked like he had won the Triwizard Cup.

“A Muggle’s heard of me. How nice.” Harry wondered exactly how many Chocolate Frogs Fudge had eaten recently. He was very...giddy. Like a schoolgirl. It worried Harry. “And these gentlemen?” He motioned to Paul and Sensei. Both men had taken up positions on other side of Harry’s chair and stood like statues.

“Paul and Leonard.” Harry said simply as he pointed to each one. “My bodyguards. They’re not very good at conversation when they’re in protection mode. It’s best to ignore them.” Harry offered. The sooner attention shifted away from Paul and Sensei, the better.

“Bodyguards?” Fudge asked. “Why would you need bodyguards?” Fudge seemed completely perplexed.

“Hem-hem.” Harry could not believe the rush of relief he felt when he heard that rude noise from Dolores Umbridge. He looked up as though he just noticed her and smiled.

“Professor Umbridge.” Harry said calmly. “Forgive me, I didn’t see you there. My aunt, Petunia Dursley. Aunt Petunia, Dolores Umbridge. She taught at Hogwarts last year as my Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.” Harry explained to his aunt.

“That’s an important class.” Petunia said with a smile. “Did you learn a lot?” she asked Harry.

“Some.” He said with a dismissive shrug. “I don’t really enjoy reading books when there are practical lessons available.” Umbridge looked like she was ready to explode in all of her toadiness. Harry was tempting to make horse sounds to see if she would react, but restrained himself in favor of getting what he wanted and then leaving as quickly as possible. “Minister Fudge, I really do not wish to waste any of your valuable time.” Harry said as he turned back to the man. “I only came here to ask you for one tiny favor.”

“What’s that, Harry?” Fudge asked as he leaned in.

“Remove my name and image from all Muggle news broadcasts.” Harry said calmly. “I am fine, as you can see. I’m not being held anywhere against my will. My aunt and I picked out another boarding school for me to attend this year.” Harry told the Minister.

“Why would you want to attend another boarding school? Don’t you miss Hogwarts?” Fudge asked. This couldn’t be easy, could it?

“Hogwarts has become a bit...much in recent years. My life has been in danger at Hogwarts every year.” Harry shrugged a bit as though it really didn’t concern him. “I felt I needed a break, so I picked another school and left.” Harry wondered how much to tell Fudge.

“A break? From the wizarding world? That’s just not done, Harry. This is your world!” Fudge appeared a little frantic.

“I’m not leaving it, Minister.” Harry told him. “The Muggle world was never really my home. I’m planning on returning to Hogwarts eventually, just not right now.” Harry told the man.

“You’re being inconsiderate!” Umbridge interrupted. “No one knew where you were and now you’re telling us that the wizarding world is not good enough for you!” Harry only raised his eyebrows as he looked at Umbridge. She was really pathetic, wasn’t she?

“Now you see here!” Petunia snapped and surged to her feet. “It is not the wizarding world’s business what Harry does during the school year or any other time of the year! He is an independent person, not some freak,” Harry wanted to laugh, he really did. “that you stare at in a zoo!” That was disturbingly close to a dream Harry had once. “He is just a sixteen year old boy who is tired of nearly dying at the end of every term!” Harry sat back in his chair with amusement written on his features. Go, Aunt Petunia. “I will not sit here and let you make him feel as though he has some responsibility towards you, Ms. Umbridge!” Harry wanted to cheer for Aunt Petunia. “He has no responsibility but to himself.”

“He is the Boy-Who-Lived. One of our celebrities. Without him, the Dark Lord would have continued his rampage!” Harry heard Sensei snort beside him, but Umbridge didn’t notice.

“Actually, Mum was responsible for that.” Harry said to Umbridge. “I was just left behind and every one thinks it was me.” Harry shrugged as though it didn’t matter. “Oh, well.”

“You need to appear in wizarding public to let every one know that you are okay.” Fudge said, motioning Umbridge to stay silent.

“No, I really don’t. Just make a press release or something that says I’m fine and your announcement was all a mistake.” Harry felt his throat close again. This was not going the way he wanted it. Harry stood and Sensei and Paul snapped to a more focused attention. “I won’t take up any more of your time, Minister. After all, I’m sure you’re busy.” Harry started moving towards the doors when Fudge reached out and grabbed his arm. The touch only lasted a second. Sensei had knocked Fudge’s arm away and Paul had produced his gun in that second. Harry could hear Fudge gulp.

“It’s okay.” Harry gasped. “Don’t kill him.” Harry gasped for air through his closed throat and sank to the floor. That second of fear caused Harry’s closed throat to descend into full panic attack. “Get Umbridge out of the room.” He said to Paul. Sensei blocked Fudge’s path to Harry and glared at the man as Paul escorted a very upset Dolores Umbridge from the room. Once Umbridge was gone, Harry allowed his panic attack to take him. He shook the slightest bit and tried to start one of his breathing exercises. Petunia guided Harry to his chair and held one of Harry’s hands.

Paul returned and got on his knees in front of Harry. “Okay, Harry. Just breathe. No one’s going to hurt you here. Leonard and I are here, so is your aunt, and this nice Minister chap.” Harry followed Paul’s instructions for breathing. “Here, this might help.” Paul produced the vial of calming draught. Harry took it and swallowed the whole dose with a slight grimace.

“There is more than one reason Harry was sent to a different school.” Harry heard Petunia say as Harry was talked through his breathing exercise. “He was not getting the required treatment for these attacks of his. Muggles may not be able to do magic, but they do help with his panic attacks.” She told Fudge.

“I see.” Fudge fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair. “Are you sure we can’t convince him to stay?” Fudge asked Petunia in a desperate tone.

“I’m afraid not. Harry will return to the magical world when he is ready to return. Hounding him in the Muggle world will not do any good at all.” Petunia glared at Fudge and the man quailed under her gaze.

“I’ll just make sure that his name is taken from the Muggle news, then.” Fudge said softly. He stood and moved to his desk as Harry started to breathe normally again. He wrote out something on a bit of parchment and the parchment folded itself into a paper airplane and zoomed away, screaming urgent at a high volume of sound.

“Thank you, Minister.” Harry said with a smile. “I’m sorry you had to witness that. Those attacks come at the strangest times.” Harry apologized.

“Think nothing of it.” Fudge told Harry. “These things do happen, I’m sure.” Fudge stood and shook Harry’s hand again. “Send me a letter from time to time to let me know how you are, dear boy. I’ll keep the hounds from following you.”

This was better than Harry could have hoped for. Fudge was doing everything without an argument now. Panic attacks...could be useful? “Thank you again, Minister.” Harry said as he and Sensei walked to the doors.

“You’re welcome, Harry.” Fudge said as Harry opened the doors. Sensei gave his shoulder a quick squeeze. Harry smiled at the man and nodded to Percy Weasley as he passed him. The walk back down the hallway was quick and Harry pushed the call button for the elevator. Would he be going back to St. Jude’s now or in the morning? Hmm. Did they have time for lunch in London, as his teenager body was letting its displeasure known at a lack of food in the past hour? Dessert in the form of mint chocolate chip ice cream? Oh, that sounded good. The elevator doors opened and Harry’s smile about mint chocolate chip faded as he saw who was in the doorway.

“Harry, my dear boy. It’s good to see you.”

Author's Note: This is already twenty pages long. I refuse to make it longer. Remember, the forums are for questions!

Author's Note: You all are so...scary, sometimes. For everyone who called me evil: it's true. I seriously considered changing who the person was in the lift, just to see your reactions, but I couldn't be that cruel. So, here's the next chapter, not even a week after the last one! Enjoy!

Well, this wasn't supposed to happen at all. Harry stared at the man in the lift and took a few steps back in shock. Why did his life always have to be bloody complicated? Sensei immediately nudged Harry behind him after seeing his student back away. Harry gave the man a small grateful smile and studied his current enemy just outside the lift doors, effectively blocking Harry's only escape path. Why didn't the magical world believe in fire escape stairs? "Headmaster." Harry returned to Dumbledore's greeting, completely unsure of what to do now. Dumbledore was unpredictable right now. He seemed too happy to see Harry. Gleeful, almost. The thought was disturbing.

Dumbledore looked around and gave an odd yet twinkling look to Paul and Sensei. Harry realized that the man was amused at the idea of bodyguards. Harry made a mental note to remind the wizard of this when he approached Harry about further guards from the Order. Harry wouldn't allow them as the Muggle guards seemed much more effective than the wizards ever were. The only one who actually did anything was Arabella Figg and she was a squib! Harry watched as Dumbledore's twinkle died when he laid eyes on Petunia. "Mrs. Dursley, how lovely to see you again." He told her.

"I'm sure!" Petunia snapped. Harry watched her hackles rise and inched away from her. This wasn't going to be pretty. Petunia was very upset at Dumbledore and having an actual physical target could spell the man's impending doom. That would be fun to watch.

Dumbledore ignored Petunia's comment and stepped closer to Sensei. Harry stayed firmly behind the man and Sensei wasn't letting Dumbledore get around him at all. Harry knew that Dumbledore would be dead if glares could kill, for Sensei's glare would be enough to kill a thousand Dumbledores and then turn the corpses to ash. He didn't know if Sensei knew a lot about the headmaster, but Harry's reaction seemed to be enough for him to think that Dumbledore was an enemy. "We've been very worried about you at Hogwarts', young

man.” Dumbledore said to Harry. He tried moving around Sensei, but found himself blocked by a rather intimidating man who had one hand in his jacket. Harry knew exactly what Sensei was ready to pull out and he spoke up to keep the man from putting a bullet through Dumbledore’s head. Voldemort would have a field day.

“Sorry, Headmaster. My aunt thought that I needed some time away from a place where I’ve nearly died.” Harry said without contrition. Dumbledore blinked and looked between Petunia and Harry. Harry could almost hear his thoughts: How does a Muggle enchant someone? Ha. Got one over on him.

“Come along, Harry. We need to get you back to school. You have that test this afternoon.” Harry blinked. He didn’t have a test, but he was willing to go along with Petunia on this one. Dumbledore wouldn’t have much power in the face of Harry’s legal guardian, Muggle or not.

“Mrs. Dursley, there have been some developments recently concerning Voldemort.” Harry felt Sensei stiffen in front of him. Paul and Sensei had shot each other a look as Petunia pressed the call button for the elevator. Harry took a deep breath and got ready for whatever they were planning. “It is simply not safe for Harry to be out of Hogwarts at this moment.”

“You don’t seem to understand something, Headmaster.” Petunia actually sneered at him. Harry pressed closer to Sensei and Harry felt the man pat his arm. He relaxed a bit and watched the scene between Dumbledore and Petunia play out. He was already stressed out from his two panic attacks of the day and the calming potion wasn’t going to let him have another one anytime soon. He was tired from the night before and then his brain made a connection. His panic attacks always came on in life-threatening situations (or what he thought was life threatening) or directly after a Voldemort dream. The attacks after a Voldemort dream always came on easier and faster than any other attack. What a connection! Harry couldn’t wait to share with Paul. “Harry has been attacked more at your...school than any other place on earth. This Voldemort person has yet to find Harry at school this year and I intend to keep it that way. Don’t think that just because you run the only magical school in Britain that Harry is

obligated to attend.” Go, Aunt Petunia! “You have had far too much say in the boy’s life and now I’m not letting it go any further.”

Harry was starting to see where this was going. Petunia had marched up to Dumbledore and started poking a finger in his chest at the words “now I’m not” and she kept it up. She was also removing him from the direct path to the lift. The doors “binged” open and Sensei and Paul each dropped two small objects to their front and backs. Harry was blinded as bright flashes went off and clouds of smoke started to swirl around him. He blinked against the flash behind his eyes and felt himself pulled rather harshly towards the lift. Sensei pushed Harry to the back wall and stood in front of him while Paul guarded the door. Both men had weapons in their hands.

“Get down, deshi.” Sensei told Harry. Harry looked around as he wondered exactly how he was to ‘get down’. There was no way he was just going to take a seat in a combat situation. “Stay alert. We don’t know what will happen.” Harry nodded and watched as the lift doors slid closed. Where was his aunt?

“Where’s Aunt Petunia?” Harry asked quietly as the lift started to descend.

“We are following her orders, deshi. That’s all you need to know.” Sensei told him. Pardon? Her orders?

“But we can’t just leave her there!” Harry said as he pushed himself off the wall to face Sensei.

“We must and we will.” Sensei said as he pulled Harry into his arms. Harry fought for a second before relaxing into the hug Sensei was offering. This was different from Paul, Hermione, and Petunia. Stronger, somehow. More understanding of what Harry was thinking at just that moment. This was more than comfort; this was also restraint from rushing into battle. “I know it’s hard, but she told us what to do if something like this would happen. We must follow the plan. We’ll meet up with her later.” Harry took a deep breath, thankful for the calming potion still in his system, and nodded. Petunia could and most likely would take care of herself. He could understand that,

but he would hurt Dumbledore in very painful ways if anything happened to his aunt. The lift opened to the Atrium and Harry was immediately pushed behind Sensei. Harry could almost swear he had memorized the back of the man's jacket.

"Harry?" Paul whispered. "Anyone from that Order of yours here?" The two men walked forward a bit and allowed Harry to glance around.

"Yes." Harry whispered. "That's Professor Snape over there to our left." He told Sensei and Paul. "The man with the weird eye will see me in just a second. The two with red hair are Bill and Charlie Weasley. Don't mess with them. They know a lot of spells. Same with those two. The bald man and the girl with purple hair."

"This should be easy." Sensei said with a smirk as Moody turned to him and pointed. Harry shrank behind his bodyguards and hoped for the best.

"They're Muggles, lads." Moody said with a smirk as he started to clunk forwards to Harry. "Potter, come out from behind them. We need to get you back to school." Harry saw Kingsley shoot an amused look at Moody before stepping back and folding his arms. What was this? Did Harry have an ally here? Was Kingsley just there for show?

"I'm not going back there." Harry told Moody calmly. "My aunt won't allow it and I certainly don't want to." Harry watched as shocked looks went around the Atrium. Snape looked like his birthday had come early and someone had presented him with a whole basilisk carcass. Well, at least one person was on Harry's side in this. Kingsley had a little smirk playing across his lips. Make that two people on his side. Harry knew that Sensei had already seen everything Harry had seen and drawn the same conclusions.

"Step away from him, sirs." Moody said. "We'll take care of him from here." Paul and Sensei exchanged looks. Neither said a word.

Sensei reached behind him and pulled Harry between himself and Paul. Paul had his gun out and sighted anyone close enough to be a target as they walked. "He's got a gun, lads." Harry almost snorted. Good going, Captain Obvious! "We don't want anyone getting hurt." Moody said as his wand appeared in his hand. Sensei and Paul exchanged looks. This was not going to be pretty.

"No one will be hurt if you let us do our jobs." Paul said in a voice Harry had never heard before. Wow, Paul could be scary. Who knew? Paul stared down Moody with a dangerous look that promised swift pain if Harry was touched.

"Just give us the boy. I'm afraid you don't realize who he is." Moody said. "He's far more important than you know."

"The "Boy-Who-Lived" stays with us." Sensei snarled. Whoa, that was scary. Harry was glad that Paul and Sensei were on his side. He really was. Moody raised his wand and pointed it at the Paul and Sensei. A red flash left his wand. Harry knew what that was. Stunning spell. Sensei grabbed him and threw him to the ground and both men ended up on top of him. Ouch.

"He was trying to hit you." Harry hissed at Sensei. He tried to wriggle out from under them, but Sensei stopped him with a gesture.

"We lowly Muggles do not know that." Sensei said with a grin. "Now, however, we can retaliate." Sensei and Paul popped back to their feet and set Harry on his. "Move." Sensei said to Harry. Harry dashed along the wall and felt Sensei and Paul close behind him. Stunning spells continued to hit the wall just where they had been before or where they were going to end up. One hit directly in front of Harry and Harry looked to see Professor Snape aiming at him. Greasy git. He's going to give the rest of them ideas. He almost got us. "Keep going." Sensei ordered from behind him. Harry dashed past one fireplace and felt someone's arms grab him and pull him inside. His head cracked against the mantelpiece. Harry bit back a cry of pain and reacted to the arms. He drove his knee into their groin. A shriek told him his target was female. Purple hair bobbed in the corner of his eye. Tonks. Harry fell to his knees when she released him and he struck

with his elbow to her stomach. She doubled over as Sensei pulled Harry back out of the fireplace.

“You okay?” He asked.

“I’ll live.” Harry said as he rubbed the goose egg forming on his head. Ouch. Harry noticed Paul throwing small blades at the wizards, much like Harry’s own blades. Harry almost felt sorry for them until he realized that mediwizards could heal the wounds from these blades with a quick wave of their wands. Paul was hitting his targets more often than not. He was going for disarm only.

Aurors appeared from one fireplace and poured into the Atrium. Harry heard Sensei say something in Japanese and Harry started to memorize it. It sounded like a swear word and a good one at that! “Deshi, I hate to ask, but can you provide a distraction?”

Harry looked up at Sensei and then around. He could do this. He looked around the Atrium and spotted the fountain of magical brethren. “I never liked that fountain, anyway.” Harry said with a smirk as he raised his hand.

“Use your wand, just in case.” Paul told him. Harry nodded and released his wand. Paul and Sensei each dug into their pockets as Harry readied his spell.

“Reducto!” Harry watched in satisfaction as one of the statues blew up. Chunks flew everywhere. “Reducto!” Water started to spray everywhere. “Brilliant. I hit a pipe.” Paul and Sensei threw several flash and smokes around the hall and surrounded themselves with them. Flashes of light startled the wizards and smoke hid Harry and his bodyguards from spells. How did they know to bring things like that? You can’t accurately hit what you can’t see.

“Let’s go.” Paul said as he pulled Harry through the smoke and towards the exit. Sensei continued to throw flash and smokes until the lift doors started. “Thank goodness for automated services.” Paul said with a grin.

“Yeah.” Harry said as he took a deep breath. “What about Aunt Petunia?” He asked.

“She will be fine, deshi.” Sensei told him. “Just fine.” They reappeared on the street and Sensei set a fast clip down it. Harry was grateful that Sensei had emphasized running in his training, but running attracted Muggle attention. Every Muggle they passed only looked away after seeing the way the two were dressed. Was this a standard bodyguard uniform, then? Harry skidded to a stop when Snape and Shacklebolt appeared out of an alleyway. Aunt Petunia was with them.

Paul and Sensei scared all wizarding history from Harry’s head when he saw their guns appear in their hands and pointed directly at the new arrivals. How fast were they? “Potter, your aunt has some rather charming powers of persuasion.” Snape told him as Petunia stepped forward.

“Code.” Sensei questioned Petunia, not allowing her to get close to Harry. Harry found himself once again staring at the back of Sensei’s jacket. Was that a new pattern?

“Zen sends his greetings, 007.” She smiled at Harry. Harry stepped forward and hugged his aunt. She was safe and so was he.

“What Snape here is trying to say is that your aunt decked the Headmaster of Hogwarts.” Shacklebolt said with a grin bordering close to ‘giddy’. “Broke his nose and knocked him off his feet.” Kingsley smothered his chuckles and looked at Harry. “Don’t worry about my old partner. A stray ‘Obliviate’ hit him just after we left your school. Can’t imagine how it happened.” Kingsley looked up at the sky innocently before grinning at Harry.

Harry smiled at the Auror. “Thank you.” He said sincerely.

“You’re welcome. I figured that you fighting to stay anywhere not Hogwarts could mean one of two things: confounded or serious. I’d guessed you were serious when you went into hiding to avoid me.” Kingsley gave him a mock glare. “I can’t believe that you wanted to

avoid me. Worse than that, that you were serious in wanting to avoid me. You'd make a good Auror."

Snape rolled his eyes at Kingsley. "Spare the boy from further praises of his Gryffindor stupidity in battle." Snape muttered more to himself than anyone else. Harry chose to ignore Snape. He was on Harry's side, or against Dumbledore. Harry wasn't sure, but he wasn't about to jeopardize Snape cooperation by just taking offense to the insane ramblings from his mind.

"I was serious." Harry assured him. "Hogwarts is a little much for me right now. I just couldn't go back and expect to be safe."

"Yes, while this is all very touching, I'm afraid there will be another contingent of Aurors here in just a few minutes and they'll all be looking for you, Potter." Snape's sneer told Harry enough.

"That's too bad, because I feel so threatened by all you adult wizards that my magic will start becoming accidental and I just reacted when I saw you." Harry said with an innocent voice.

"What?" Snape asked. Harry only grinned and sent two strong Stunning spells at the men.

"Oops." Harry said with a shrug as the spells hit and both men dropped to the ground. "Come on, let's get out of here." Harry said quickly.

"Unexplored depths to you, deshi." Sensei said with a smirk.

"Yes, I'm sure there are." Harry smiled at his teacher and then turned to his aunt. "Why do I keep missing all of the good stuff? You gave Snape a black eye and you nearly knocked out my headmaster. Can I at least watch next time?" Harry questioned.

"I'll think about it." She told him. Harry gave a moan and shook his head.

“That means ‘no’.” He whined. He stopped himself and blinked. Weird. He had whined again in front of Aunt Petunia. Their relationship was changing. This was a good thing, right? Right?

“It won’t work like that!” Hermione told Draco as she snatched back the plans for the Potter’s Protectors next big plan. She scratched out one line and drew in another. “This will keep it hidden from view and still allow it to function. The other way would have announced its presence before we were ready.”

Draco looked at her blankly before closing his eyes and putting his head on the table. “If your Head of House ever decides that you are perfect to continue the traditions, run far away and run very fast.” Draco mumbled through his arms.

“He had you up late, did he?” She asked as she studied the boy’s posture.

“Yes.” He answered simply. Hermione decided that she wouldn’t ask what they had been doing all night and returned to her plans.

“Okay, now that we’ve got that worked out....hmm.” Hermione turned to her checklist and went through the items on it. Dodge Dumbledore? Check. Meet Professor Snape and Draco Malfoy in dungeons? Check. Breakfast? Check. Study Transfiguration? Check. Plan my part of next prank? Check. Study Potions? No check. “Time to study Potions.” Hermione said, more to herself than to Draco.

“Do you ever stop, Granger?” Draco asked, irritated with his previous night’s sleep.

“No.” Hermione said shortly as she dug into her book bag for her Potions text. “This is Saturday and I have to spend it down in the dungeons. Why would I continue to do nothing?” Hermione opened her book and started reading her assignment for her next class.

“You are mental.” Draco said as he lifted his head from his arms and pulled her prank plans towards him. “What is this thing?”

“Delay time release mechanism.” Hermione mumbled as she unrolled a piece of parchment and frowned at the essay assignment.

“Huh?” Draco asked, staring at the diagram.

“Egg timer attached to a trigger.” Hermione elaborated.

Draco blinked and looked down at the drawing again. “Why didn’t you say that in the first place?” He said as he pushed the drawing back to her. Stupid know it alls and their cute little drawings.

Hermione glanced up at him before returning to her book. “I did. Just with different words.” Hermione told him.

“You are mental.” Draco buried his head in his arms again and proceeded to ignore his classmate. Yes, he knew he was insulting her, but he just couldn’t bring himself to care in his current stupor of sleep deprivation.

“You’re so adorable when you’re sleep deprived.” Hermione told him in a sweet voice.

Draco’s head came up again and he looked at Hermione. “Really?” he asked.

“No.” Hermione told him.

Draco scowled. “That wasn’t nice.”

“Why don’t you take a nap?” Hermione suggested. “That’ll save me from you descending into whining in the next twenty minutes or so.” She motioned to the couch. “I’ll wake you in time for lunch or when the professor comes back. Whichever one happens first.”

“Alright. Wake me the second Professor Snape comes home.” Draco left the table and went over to the couch. He toed off his shoes and settled down. Hermione only snorted under her breath and returned to her homework. She knew Draco would be unconscious of

the world around him in exactly five minutes. She would finally get some peace and quiet to work.

She almost left her seat ten minutes later when the door swung open and admitted Professor Snape. He was not walking very fast, but at a steady pace laced with pain. His hand was clutching his forehead and he held his body in the odd manner of one who had broken ribs.

“Are you alright, Professor?” Hermione asked as she stood up.

Snape nodded tightly and lowered himself into his chair. He looked at Draco on the couch and smirked. “I will tear your Golden Boy limb from limb if I ever find him without that aunt of his.” Snape told her. Hermione had to wonder if the man was actually serious or if Harry was just a convenient scapegoat for his current affliction. “Miss Granger, would you be willing to go to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and fetch me the green bottle on the bottom shelf?”

“Of course, sir.” Hermione dashed off to the bathroom and quickly located the bottle he had requested. She returned with the same speed with which she had left and handed the bottle into his waiting hand.

“Thank you.” He said with a tight nod. Let it never be said that Severus Snape was not polite when others warranted such manners. He uncorked it and drained half the contents before setting it on the table. Draco stirred then and sat up. “Sleeping Beauty awakes.” Snape commented with a snort.

“Severus? What happened?” Draco asked as he took in the state of his mentor.

“I met Harry Potter today in London.” Snape said lightly. “He was kind enough to keep my involvement in the subterfuge of his whereabouts secret through what he called ‘accidental magic’. I’m finding that difficult to believe.” Snape explained while he massaged the bridge of his nose.

“Harry has always been good at accidental magic.” Hermione informed him.

“That’s disturbing.” Snape said. “Far more disturbing than him actually having accidental magic at his age. It was supposed to have stopped by now.” Snape said calmly. “What do you mean by ‘good at accidental magic’?”

Hermione related the entire story of Aunt Marge to Snape who listened without comment. “Strange.” He said after she finished. “Very strange.”

“Yes, it is.” Draco said in an odd voice. “You say you met Potter in London?” Draco steered the conversation back to why his mentor was in such bad shape.

Snape leaned his head back and nodded. “The headmaster called me shortly after my second class of the day. You two were already here and I was about to join you when his hyper little head appeared in the fireplace to ask me to join him. I, of course, went along with him. I find out that we are headed to the Ministry, for Harry Potter was sighted by one of our own there.”

“Who?” Hermione asked. She wanted to tell Harry later who had alerted Dumbledore. Revenge would be fun. Merlin, Hermione was spending too much time with the Slytherins.

“Dolores Umbridge, believe it or not.” Snape answered her. He looked at the children’s faces and snorted. “My feelings exactly.”

“That old cow?” Draco demanded. “That cold, callous-“ he cut himself off before he could descend into the type of speech that would result in a rebuke from his mentor. He was tempted to continue but thought better of it. Hermione was not so restrained. She let out a series of swear words in French.

“You are very lucky I’m ignoring my comprehension of the French language, Miss Granger.” Snape said with a sneer. Really, some of the things the girl had said.

“Good. It’s all true, though.” Hermione said as she started to pace.

“And anatomically impossible.” Snape lifted his head and glared at her until she stopped pacing. “If I may continue?” He asked as Hermione sank onto the couch next to Draco. “Potter made it out, rest assured. He had two men with him who were acting like bodyguards. You are both acquainted.”

“Paul and Sensei.” Hermione said with a smile.

“Yes.” Snape lowered his head again and sighed. “Both are well-trained and protected Potter to the utmost, but they did rely on him to make a rather, ah, explosive distraction. I’m afraid that the fountain will never be the same again.” Snape finished with his explanation and sighed. His headache was not going away.

“Harry hates that fountain.” Hermione said in a thoughtful tone. “Harry did get away, right?” She asked with a worried tone.

“Yes, Potter got away. As did the aunt and bodyguards. I’m sure Potter is just fine, Miss Granger. Go return to your work or whatever plotting you were doing before my arrival. I will ignore anything I hear or see for the next hour.” Hermione nodded and moved back to the table. She dug into her bag and pulled out her Mini-Messenger.

“Do you think we should warn her before lunch appears on that table?” Draco asked Snape softly so Hermione wouldn’t hear him.

“It’s far more amusing to watch her reactions.” Snape said as he closed his eyes.

-Skywalker, are you there?

-Right here, Mi. What’s up?

-Snape just told me about your little trip to London. Why didn’t you warn me? I could have had enough pranks set to go off that would have lasted Dumbledore a millennia.

-You'll call me stupid, but I forgot.

-You're right. You are stupid. Professor Snape tells me you got away safely.

-Yeah. My aunt nearly knocked out Professor Dumbledore and broke his nose. I never get to witness the good stuff.

-At least you're safe. That's all that matters.

-Dumbledore still after you?

-Yes. Professor Snape is protecting me. I spend a lot of time in his quarters as punishment for 'neglecting basic potions safety rules.' He set me up.

-Slytherin.

-Yes. How are you doing?

-Better and better. I had two panic attacks today, but the situation was really tense, so I'm not too worried. I go back to St. Jude's tomorrow.

-That's good. I'm sure you've been missing Paul and Zen.

-Yes, I have. Sensei has had me in the training hall every day for most of day. Quite annoying, but I've learned a lot.

-I'm sure you have. Please take care of yourself, Skywalker.

-I will. You, too.

Author's Note: There you have it. Next chapter: Harry's return to St. Jude's. A very large secret is hinted at. Paul and Sensei are suspicious. Why is Draco sneaking around? See you next time!

Author's Note: Teasers make rabid readers. I think I shall refrain from teasers in the future. The reaction was not pretty. On to the story!

Harry waved good-bye to his aunt one last time and entered St. Jude's with Paul. It was good to be back. Harry told Paul he was going up to his room for a minute and dashed up the stairs. Once there, he quickly put his uniforms away, his books on the shelves, and his good suit in the closet. He stared at what was left in his box. Voldemort had been as good as his word. Harry was now the "proud" owner of a set of Death Eater robes and the accompanying mask.

They looked harmless on his bed. Childish, almost. He shook himself out of his thoughts, folded the robes into a small square, and hid them under his uniform trousers. His mask went under his shirts. He touched the ring now on his right hand, his portkey for his lessons. Voldemort had been rather clever about his password. Lessons – in Parseltongue. No one else could use the portkey but Harry and Voldemort. This meant that Harry would be alone should he need help of any kind.

Harry decided to stop thinking about it. Voldemort's terse little note had said that Harry would know when he was required for lessons. Required for lessons? Harry supposed that his life had always been a part of the strange...the very strange. Why should it change now?

Harry left his room and went back downstairs. It was time for lunch and his floormates were waiting for him. He entered the dining room to cheers of "007!" It was good to be back.

"I'm very proud of you, Harry." Paul said as Harry opened the door to the office. Harry dropped onto the couch and gave Paul a confused look.

"Huh?" Harry asked. Not so eloquent today.

"You did exactly as you promised and let the adults take care of things. I'm very proud of you." Paul explained. He watched as Harry colored at the praise.

“Thanks, Paul.” He said as he relaxed back into the sofa. “I still got to have some fun. That fountain will never be the same.” Harry grinned at the memory of the wizard’s head flying through the air, making a rather irate Moody dodge in an undignified manner.

“So, how are you?” Paul asked as he turned and clicked on the tape recorder.

“I’m alright.” Harry answered honestly. “Those two panic attacks yesterday kind of irritated me, though. I’d like to know why I have them. I’ve fought my way out of life-threatening situations and I decide to have a panic attack thinking about you and Sensei in danger. Worse, a panic attack when Fudge grabbed my arm. I mean, what’s wrong with me?” Harry asked as he threw his hands up in frustration.

“There’s nothing wrong with you.” Paul said after a pause. “Panic attacks are tricky things and not always easy to pin down from case to case.” Paul explained. “You might have had them during a time when you were fighting for your life, but didn’t realize it because you didn’t know what it was. There are several causes, but we’re never really sure.” Paul checked to make sure Harry was following his explanation. “There are some physical causes, genetic factors. Women are more likely to get panic attacks, but men get them too. We have found that they are often brought on by stressful events.” Paul smiled at Harry’s reaction.

“No surprise there.” Harry muttered and folded his arms.

“What are you thinking about when you are starting to have a panic attack?” Paul asked.

“How much I don’t want a panic attack.” Harry said with a snort.

“That’s a common symptom too. You’re completely normal in this.” Paul hadn’t thought that Harry’s face would light up like it did.

“Finally! Normal in something!” Harry threw his pillow into the air in celebration.

“Yes. Normal.” Paul agreed.

“How do I get rid of them?” Paul looked up in surprise. The tone Harry had used. “I don’t want one at the wrong time.”

“Understandable.” Paul said in response. “Especially considering what you must face every time you step out into magical public.” Paul opened his notebook. “We’ve already started treatment for those.” Paul told Harry. “We have you meditating and doing breathing exercises. There are other techniques we could try. Medication could also be an option.”

“Those are the happy pills Bug takes for anxiety, right?” Harry asked.

“Bug told you about his medication?” Paul was surprised. Bug’s therapist and Paul had argued for some time over who had the more difficult patient. “Surprising. He must really trust you.”

“We were talking backstage and he happened to mention it.” Harry explained. “After I told him about my occasional requirement for sleeping pills because of my nightmares.” Harry shrugged. “It was no big deal.”

“Says the boy who chatted up the magical equivalent of the prime minister.” Paul turned and dug into his refrigerator. Harry put in a request for his favorite fruit juice. “Okay, another technique you’re already doing is journaling.” Paul reached out to hand Harry his juice, but stopped at the look on Harry’s face. “What?”

“I kind of forgot.” Harry said, amazed that he had forgotten such a thing. “I haven’t written in my journal for weeks.”

“I wasn’t aware that you wanted to start group therapy. That was our deal, right?” Paul looked at Harry.

“I’ve been busy, alright?” Harry groaned in frustration. “There was a maniac wizard attempting to pry my brain apart. Let’s not forget the

coma, the school play, and this newest adventure of being pursued by my own government.” Harry paused. “Paul, do you think that’s why my panic attacks have been increasing?”

Paul looked thoughtful for a second before running a hand through his hair. “It might be.” He paused. “And it might not.” Paul smirked and shrugged. “Why don’t we see what happens once you take it up again?”

“Okay.” Harry agreed. It couldn’t hurt and it might help.

“I will, of course, be checking to see that you are writing.” Paul held up a hand as Harry opened his mouth to protest. “I won’t read anything except the date. I’ll be happy to see writing and that’s all. I won’t read it unless you want me to.” Paul told him.

“Thanks, Paul.” Both Harry and Paul jumped as an obviously peevish hiss came from the tank on the other side of the room.

“That’s it! I have been waiting, quite patiently, I might add, to welcome you back from wherever you went and you’ve ignored me! You didn’t even look my way when you came in! I feel so unloved!”

Harry stood up and went over to the tank. “I’m sorry, Zen. I’ve been very busy. Some people tried to take me back to the wizards.” Harry explained to his reptilian friend.

“What? Who are they? Where are they? I’ll bite them!” Zen coiled around himself in agitation. “How dare they try to harm the lightning child?”

“Harry, is my snake having a heart attack?” Paul asked in concern. The noises Zen was making could not be considered normal.

“Um, no.” Harry answered. “He’s just upset.” Harry turned back to the ranting snake. “Please, Zen. Calm down. Would you like me to take you out?”

Zen promptly fell into a quiescent coil and looked at Harry. "Yes, please." Harry lifted the top off and allowed Zen to wriggle onto his hand. Harry returned to the couch and settled down once again.

"Cute snake you have there." Paul remarked as Zen attempted a figure eight pattern.

"Yeah. Be careful; he's an attack snake." Harry grinned at Paul and ran a finger down Zen's back.

"Do you know what would make this perfect?" Zen asked conversationally. "A mouse; yes, a mouse would make this perfect, my lightning child."

"What does that mean?" Harry asked, still quite put out that he had yet to receive a straight answer from the snake.

"It means only the meaning you give it." Zen told him. "Now, about this mouse?"

Fours weeks passed quickly for Harry at St. Jude's. His friends hadn't thought too deeply about Harry's face on the news. Bug had summed it up: "We're all weird. You're just a little weirder than most." and that had been the end of the matter. It was as though they honestly didn't care about it. They all thought that Harry should be the same way...as though it didn't matter. No other wizards appeared at St. Jude's and the Minister did not send any messages demanding Harry return to the magical world. Harry's sanctuary was safe...for now.

Harry and Paul discussed bringing in Vernon to the family therapy sessions. Harry had vetoed every suggestion for an entire three weeks before he grudgingly agreed that trying a session would be reasonable. As long as Paul was there the entire time and Harry got to pick where he wanted to sit. The stipulations had surprised Paul and set his antennae quivering. Harry obviously did not like the idea, but was willing to try as long as he was in control and had someone unbiased on his side. Paul had a feeling that there was more to Harry's dislike of his uncle than he was letting on. Harry had hinted at it in the past and now was giving just a bit more evidence, but he

wasn't giving it willingly. Every question directed down that venue of inquiry was firmly denied; Harry did not want to talk about his uncle.

"Are they here yet?" Harry asked Paul from his favorite seat on the couch. Paul smiled at Harry and nodded.

"They're on their way up." Paul stopped and looked at Harry. The boy did not look like he had slept last night. Worse, he looked like he was shaking! "Are you sure you're ready for this?" Paul asked, concerned for his charge's mental state. Harry looked like he was one straw away from breaking the camel's back.

"I'm fine." Harry answered. Uh-oh. There was that old answer that meant I'm about to fall to pieces, but thanks for asking.

"We could cover some of this in your regular therapy first, if you want to." Harry was tempted to say 'yes', but knew that he wouldn't be able to talk about it. He never wanted to talk about it, but he could draw. Paul had asked Harry for more pictures of life with the Dursleys and Harry had filled an entire sketch book. Some of them were okay and others were not. All of them had given Paul a better understanding of Harry.

Vernon was always portrayed as 'larger-than-life' in Harry's drawings and loomed in a type of forced perspective over the viewer. Paul could practically hear the ranting he seemed to be doing in a few of the pictures. Petunia was almost hidden in the background and was always occupied in some household task. The boy, Dudley, often appeared in front of the telly or his computer, corpulent and bloated, surrounded with food, drink, and material possessions. Paul almost suspected that Dudley's images had been doctored through sibling rivalry, but Harry's blatant honesty about anything relating to his family (aside from his initial denial of anything being wrong) told Paul that anything Harry drew was the truth about his life.

"Remember to breathe." Paul said in alarm at the rather pale Harry. "You're safe here, Harry."

“I know.” Harry said as he patted his right arm. “I just feel safer knowing my wand is right here,” he patted his arm again “and my back is to the wall.” Harry mumbled the last part, but Paul caught it.

“Harry, you don’t have to do this if you’re not ready.” Paul told the boy. This was another issue Paul thought Harry had left behind: a need to live to other’s expectations.

“I know.” Harry shrugged. “I think I’ll be okay.” Harry said. “He can’t hurt me here.” Harry jerked then, as though he realized that he had just revealed something that should have been kept secret.

Paul’s heart leapt into his throat. Was Harry actually talking about his uncle? Paul reached out a hand and locked the door.

“You said ‘he’.” Paul said as he turned his attention on Harry. “Who’s ‘he’?” Paul wanted to scream with frustration when Harry shrugged. “Was it your uncle, Harry?” Paul knew that just ‘one more question’ was all that was needed to get Harry to open up a bit.

Harry seemed to be weighing the various consequences of the question in his mind. Paul noticed that the temperature started to drop in the room as Harry started another breathing exercise. Sensei had mentioned that Harry’s magical abilities had manifested several times, mostly unnoticed by Harry himself, in the form of light or breeze. Only once had Sensei noticed the phenomena with which Paul was most familiar. The temperature changes were disconcerting but they did not appear to harm Harry. “Sometimes.” Harry’s voice whispered. Paul watched the breath cloud in front of Harry. Harry took no notice of it. “He was never nice to me. Well, he was once, but that’s all I can remember.” Harry admitted as he pulled his legs to his chest. Paul knew it was a bad sign when Harry had skipped over his usual first step of comfort in the shape of his pillow. Harry had now turned into “Ball Harry”.

“How did he act towards you?” Paul asked. He watched as Harry’s body language changed slightly. The temperature dropped even lower. They would have icicles soon.

Harry shrugged. Paul waited. Harry would answer sooner..."He didn't love me." Ah, there it was. "Or want me." Harry stared another breathing exercise and the temperature rose a few degrees. "He did not..." Harry stopped and shook his head as though to rid himself of some memory or mental image.

"Did not, what?" Paul asked quickly. Harry was talking and Paul knew he might not say much more about this particular topic.

"Aunt Petunia was a little better." Harry said suddenly. "She never really harmed me. Well, she did swing a frying pan at me." Harry looked up and saw Paul watching him. "Once." Harry continued. "I think she was joking though. The swing was kind of half-hearted. It didn't even come close."

"Did Vernon ever joke?" Paul asked. He was trying to steer the conversation back to the cause of Harry's anxiety.

"Only with Dudley." Harry answered. "He was always serious with me." Harry took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

"Would you say that Vernon hurt you, Harry?" Paul asked. Harry's eyes snapped open and he shook his head in denial.

"No." Harry shook his head again. "I was never really hurt. I healed really quickly as a kid. Wish I had some of that now. Less time in the Hospital Wing." He added as explanation. "I could be pretty cheeky when I wanted and he corrected that—"Harry jumped as a heavy hand knocked on the door. A loud voice demanded to know why the door was locked as the same heavy hand rattled the door in its frame.

"Does your aunt know?" Paul demanded. He swore to himself that Petunia Dursley would not get away with this farce of caring aunt if she did.

"No." Harry shook his head. "He ignored me when Aunt Petunia was around." The temperature in the room dropped sharply and Harry shook. "I wasn't to tell." He whispered. "No one else can know." Harry pulled in on himself and nearly transformed into a ball. The door

rattled again and Harry pushed himself back into the couch. He was breathing as calmly as he could in his slightly panicked state. How had the child lived this long with this inside of him? Paul now understood how people could fly into a rage and kill someone. Vernon Dursley's neck between his hands would have been very welcome.

Paul stood from his seat and opened the door a crack. "Give us a few minutes, please." Paul shut the door firmly in Vernon's face, holding a little thrill of pleasure to himself. He was almost positive that the door hit Vernon's nose. Paul went over to the couch and sat next to Harry, laying a light hand on Harry's shoulders. Harry jumped, but did not move away. "Harry. It's..." Well, it wasn't okay. "You're safe. I'm here with you." Paul repeated Harry's level of safety several times over before Harry started to relax. Harry un-balled and looked up at Paul with empty eyes. He sat up all the way and leaned against Paul. The therapist wrapped his arms around Harry and waited until the temperature rose and Harry stopped shaking to speak again.

"Harry?" Paul heard a noise that meant Harry was paying attention. "I want you to listen closely. Okay?" The same noise came again. "No matter what he said to you, no matter what reason he gave, what he did to you was not your fault. It was wrong and he had no right to do it." Paul reached out a hand and smoothed Harry's hair back. "Did you know that?"

"Yes." Harry said in response to Paul's question. "Hermione told me that in second year." Harry shrugged. "Don't know how she knew."

"Good. Just remember that. It was not your fault." Paul held Harry until Harry started to pull away. "I'm canceling Vernon's sessions with you for the foreseeable future." Harry was ready to argue, but stopped when Paul held up a hand. "This is something you're going to have to trust me on. Can you do that, Harry?"

"You're the therapist." Harry told him. "I'll trust you." Paul didn't need to hear the unspoken words that usually followed that statement. It seemed that Harry was willing to cede authority to the adults. "Now, art room or the lounge?"

“Huh?” Harry asked. Paul was jumping around from topic to topic.

“You are taking the rest of the day off. No arguments.” Harry closed his mouth. How did Paul know he was going to argue? Well, a day off regular classes would enable him to go over that book Voldemort had sent him... “No school books,” Well, there went that idea. “No practice, no workout. Just typical teenager stuff.” Paul clarified. “So, art room or the lounge?” Harry could read between the lines. Paul didn’t want him to be alone right now.

“The lounge.” Harry answered. If he couldn’t study, maybe he could watch a little television and ignore the rest of the world. Perhaps someone would play a game with him later. Something mindless.

“The lounge it is.” Paul said as he pressed a button on his desk. “I want you to have some fun today. You haven’t had fun in a long time.” Harry decided that any attempt to argue would convince Paul Harry was being stubborn on purpose. He let the statement go. “Think you can do that?”

Harry smiled. “I can do that.” Harry said as he pulled his bag towards him. “More pictures.” Harry said as he dug out some sheets of paper. “I know you wanted to see them.”

“Thank you, Harry.” Paul said as he accepted the drawings. “I’m very proud of you.” Paul told his charge. “That had to be very difficult to talk about.”

A chipper knock on the door surprised Harry. Paul stood and put his head out. “Hi, Jack. Harry, ready to go?” Harry stood and shouldered his bag. “Jack will walk you down.” Harry nodded and thanked Paul.

“007!” Jack threw his arm around Harry’s shoulders and steered him past his relatives. Harry didn’t even notice. “Where we heading?” Jack asked with a smile.

“The lounge.” Harry said, already starting to relax at the prospect of a free day.

“The lounge? That’s great. Sparky’s down there right now and he’s looking a little lonely. He mentioned something about watching ‘The Return of the Jedi’.”

“Really?” Harry asked, almost ready to run. “Let’s go!”

Paul sat in his darkened office and stared at the candle he had lit. The candle manufacturers claimed that the candle was a relaxation and calming candle meant to soothe a person after a long day. Paul was not calm. He was furious. His gaze shifted from the candle to his glass. He wished that his glass had something a bit stronger in it than apple juice. Paul was a teetotaler by nature and did not need alcohol as a daily part of his life, but tonight, well, he would welcome a strong drink, if only to remove or mask the foul taste left in his mouth from dealing with Vernon Dursley.

The very name made bile rise in the back of Paul’s throat. That pathetic imitation of a man had actually hurt Harry...for his own protection, of course. Vernon Dursley was a man who loved an audience and he willingly parted with details once Paul confronted him. Paul, Joe, and Petunia sat shocked as the narrative explained many aspects of Harry’s childhood – his cupboard in early childhood to his hesitancy in seeking out the help of an adult. Paul had a feeling that Vernon Dursley and Albus Dumbledore would get along if Petunia was not there.

Petunia Dursley had sat through the story, completely stoic until Vernon used the phrase “for his own good” in connection with hitting the boy. Petunia’s actions would forever log her name on Paul’s “Wonderful People” list. She had turned to her husband and slapped him. It was not a polite tap; this slap had her entire body behind it. Vernon’s head nearly faced backwards with the force of the blow. A pale outline of Petunia’s hand was slowly turning red. It took every ounce of strength in Paul not to cheer. Joe looked to be much the same, though he couldn’t quite hide his smile.

“Petunia, what-?” Petunia silenced her husband with a glare. Paul now knew how Dumbledore felt when facing an enraged Petunia. Petunia Dursley in a fury was no one Paul could hope to defeat.

“It would serve you right if I press charges.” Petunia hissed at him. “You do not even deserve the comfort of a jail cell. How my nephew managed to not attack you once he knew what he was...” She trailed off to give into a moment of wordless fury. “How dare you?” Paul had never heard that phrase uttered with such loathing. “You will not touch Harry. Ever. Again.” Dursley actually had the grace to look cowed under his wife’s glare. “You will not speak to him without me in the room. If you do so much as look at him the wrong way, I will take the boys and leave. I will make sure that Dudley knows exactly what kind of a man you are. You will never see your son again. Do I make myself clear?”

Vernon Dursley whimpered. He ducked his head and Paul could almost see a tail tucked between his legs. Vernon looked ready to slink away into a corner like the cur he was. “Go wait for me in the hallway. You are not to go near Harry, or speak to him, if he is out there.” Vernon got to his feet and edged out of the room, his wife’s firm glare following him the whole way. Paul resisted the urge to give Petunia a standing ovation.

Petunia sank in to the chair beside her. She closed her eyes and sighed. “My mother warned me.” She said tiredly. “She said that he wasn’t a good man. I didn’t believe her.” She gave a very unlady-like snort (Paul now knew from whom Harry had inherited that particular trait). “I didn’t listen. I was in love.” She sighed. “I thought I could change him. It was foolish of me and now someone I promised to protect was hurt.”

Joe reached out and quietly counseled Petunia as to her options now. Pressing charges was only one of them. He advised her to think about it. “You have only the future to think about.” Petunia slowly regained her air of confidence and was ready to do battle again as she left the office.

“How I wish I had a camera for that.” Joe told Paul, surprising his former flat mate. Joe was usually a gentle man. “I bet Harry would have loved to see that.”

“Yes.” Paul agreed. “He might have.” He glanced at the clock. “Let’s go see what he’s doing.” Joe didn’t need an explanation. He looked ready to hug the boy himself.

-Mi? Are you there?

-I’m here, Skywalker. What’s wrong?

-How did you know that something was wrong?

-Um...I have no idea. There is something wrong, right?

-I saw The Return of the Jedi

-You okay?

-How could Luke do something like that? He just told his sister that they were siblings (which really freaked me out, by the way) and then went off to face his father.

-He did what he had to do.

-Why did that include facing his father?

-Well, Yoda said that he would have to face his father to complete his training as a Jedi, right? That’s why he did it.

-He could have died.

-Yes.

-He nearly did. Everyone nearly died. They could have just left and gone to the farthest planet possible to live out their lives.

-They all thought freedom was worth it.

-Oh. Mi?

-Yes?

-Do you agree with what they did?

-They did what they had to do. Freedom from the Empire was worth it. I would have joined the Rebellion, had I been in Luke or Leia's place.

-Yeah. Do you believe in destiny?

-You know what I think about Divination, Harry.

-Destiny's different. Do you believe in it?

-I believe we are destined to make certain choices. Nothing else.

-Choices like whether or not to go to Hogwarts at the age of eleven?

-Exactly.

-Some choices are difficult to make.

-Well, if life were easy, it wouldn't be much fun, would it?

-Guess not. Mi, some choices are really hard to make without support.

-What are you trying to say?

-Mi, I might have to make a really big decision. Really big. This decision could have rather, ah, disturbing consequences.

-I don't like the sound of where this is going.

-Just hear me out, okay?

-Well, I'm reading, but okay.

-You're a riot, Hermione.

-I do try. Now, you were saying?

-If the worst should happen, if I come to this decision, can I trust you to allow me to make it? That you will keep those who would protect me 'for my own good' away from me?

-I know I don't like where this is going. Harry, you don't have to do something heroic here. Voldemort will only last so long. You don't have to turn into Luke Skywalker and I refuse to allow it.

-I think that's too late. I think I'm already there.

-No, you're not.

-I was living with an aunt and uncle who tried to keep me from my heritage. I was contacted by a 'wizard' and taken to a whole new world. I was given tests and little glimpses into my parents' pasts. I saw Voldemort, my Vader, my first year at school, a place where I was supposed to be safe. The challenges continue to grow, Hermione. I'm in training and in a sanctuary like Degobah. When I leave here, when I'm done with all of this training, I'll have no choice left but to face the Dark Lord.

-This is not a story, Harry! You do not have to do anything of the sort!

-I know. Just like Luke didn't have to face his father when he did. This, I choose to do.

-No. Absolutely not.

-Hermione, please. I'm not asking you for help. I'm just asking that you allow me to make the decisions I need to make when the time comes, to go when I need to, and you keep others from following me.

-Harry, please. I don't want to argue with you. You're not some storybook hero forced to meet his enemy again and again without someone there. You have friends who can help you.

-I've been alone most of the time with Voldemort. In fact, I've been alone every time I've faced him.

-That's not true!

-Yes, it is. First year, I left you behind because you said only one of us could go ahead. Second year, Ron was kept back by a rockslide. Fourth year, I wasn't alone in that graveyard, but no one there would help me. Fifth, well, you guys were there, but I faced Voldemort alone until Dumbledore showed up.

-So, what are you saying? That you're destined to meet him alone every time? That your destiny is either you or him?

-Pretty much. I don't wish to kill, Hermione, but if it gives us our freedom, gives me my freedom, I'll do it.

-You don't have to fight in this, Harry. Dumbledore can off Voldemort.

-No. Dumbledore's been training me from day one. He's allowed me to do as I liked for the most part. There were ways to be removed from danger, but he allowed me to continue. I have to question what happened. Three eleven year olds made it through traps designed to keep a cunning wizard, a fully-trained, cunning wizard from the Stone. Had that never occurred to you?

-You think Dumbledore set you up your first year?

-I feel it's true. I just don't know for sure. I don't trust Dumbledore much anymore.

-Oh, trust me. I don't like him much either. What about second year?

-I'm not sure. The thing is, he's not stepped in except to 'save' me. Unless the not-saving served his purposes.

-He protected you during fifth year.

-By keeping information from me. Had I known what I do now, I wouldn't have made half the decisions I did. He does not realize that I

was never treated like a child by my relatives (though my aunt is making inroads into that area at an alarming rate...she'll be asking if I want biscuits with my milk any time now...it's frightening) and he was only hurting me by treating me like a child.

-This sounds familiar. You sound like you did before fifth year.

-Without the anger.

-Yes, without the anger. Skywalker, you don't have to become Luke. Destiny, prophecy, it's all useless.

-It's my choices that define me, Hermione. I chose to stand against Voldemort my first year. I do not regret that decision.

-That doesn't mean you have to turn yourself over to him!

-What else would you have me do?

-Be sent to Siberia and have someone sit on you!

-Well, at least that person would keep me warm.

-Be serious, Harry.

-Hermione, I'm not saying that this is going to happen anytime soon. It might be tomorrow. It might be forty years from now. All I'm asking is that when I need to make this decision, that you'll allow me to do what I think is best. If that means facing him, fine. If that means going to Siberia so someone can sit on me, okay. Can I trust you to allow me to make the decision I need to make?

-I'll promise, if you promise me something in return?

-What?

-That you'll stop and think everything through. That you won't make any hasty decisions based on your emotions. That you'll get help if you need it before you go off doing the hero thing. That you'll do

everything you can to find another way aside from turning into Luke Skywalker.

-That is a promise I'll give freely and easily.

-Alright. Then I promise to allow you to make your decision when the time comes.

-Thank you, Mi. It means a lot to me.

-Harry, if you die, I will turn to Necromancy and bring you back, just so I can kill you with my bare hands.

-Aw. Thanks, Hermione. I didn't know you cared that much.

-I'll let Mrs. Weasley have you after I'm done.

-Now that's scary.

-And then your aunt.

-Now that's just vicious.

-It's the truth. Promise me you won't die.

-I can't promise something like that.

-No promise, no guarantee that I won't turn you over to your aunt.

-You do not have a merciful bone in your body.

-Nope. Now promise!

-Very well, if only to save my soul from eternal torment known as Petunia Dursley in a temper.

-Good.

Hermione slammed her messenger shut and threw it across the room. She pulled her knees up and buried her face in them to let out a frustrated scream.

Snape lowered his book a fraction of an inch to look at the Gryffindor. Wonderful. She was distressed. This, Snape knew, was the reason he had never attempted any offspring of his own. He had no idea how to be understanding or compassionate when children needed it. He usually left that up to his head girl or one of the prefects. "I will help hold him down if you wish to kill him, Miss Granger." Snape told her cautiously. Potter was being his typical self if Snape was reading the situation correctly.

"No thank you, Professor." Hermione mumbled from her knees.

"I take it Potter is being his usual self?" He commented more than asked.

"That's not it." She said. Oh dear Merlin. Please do not let it be about some of those female things of which I only know the bare mechanics. "He's being stupid."

"That's not surprising." Snape said. "I am quite accustomed to his stupidity." He drawled as he closed his book. "Which aspect of his stupidity has come to light this evening?"

Hermione dropped her feet to the floor and sighed. "I'm not entirely sure." She admitted. "He just asked me to promise that I will allow him to make the decisions he needs to make when 'the time comes'."

"Ah." Snape closed his book and stood up. "Draco, any insights in the adolescent male's mind?" Snape asked.

"You like him, don't you?" Draco asked Hermione. Hermione responded by throwing her glass at him. Snape brought his wand out and caught the glass easily. It had to be a female thing, this throwing of objects when they were upset.

"He's like my brother, Drake!" Hermione said.

“Just asking.” Draco said as he returned to his essay. “Sorry, Severus. I can’t help you here.”

“Traitor.” Snape hissed at Draco. How dare the boy leave him to deal with an emotional teenage girl? She had taken leave of all her senses.

“I’m fine.” She said in the next second. “Frustrated and upset, but I’ll work it out in the end. I’m sorry for throwing the glass at you, Drake.” Hermione said as she stood and smoothed out wrinkles in her robe.

“No offense taken. My mother would throw things when she was upset.” Draco said from his mound of books. “Just let me know when you need me to sit on him.”

“How did you know I was thinking of that?” Hermione asked.

“You had that ‘this is for your own good’ look on your face.” Draco commented. “Are you ready to go back to Gryffindor tower?” He asked as he marked his place.

“Yes, please.” Hermione answered.

“Do not worry, Miss Granger. Potter will come back to his senses. He just takes a bit longer than most.” Snape said as Hermione packed her books away and summoned her messenger.

“You know, that’s the strange thing.” Hermione struggled with the clasps on her satchel. “He was completely logical tonight. He countered every argument that I presented as to why he did not need to make the decision he’s hinting at.”

“Potter is capable of logic?” Snape’s face threatened to break into a smile. That idea was just...ludicrous. “What decision was he ‘hinting’ at?” Damn curiosity.

“He has this strange idea that it’s going to be him and the Dark Lord alone at the end.” Hermione said as she pulled her satchel onto her shoulder. “That it’s either Harry or the Dark Lord.” Hermione shrugged and thanked Snape as she and Draco left. Neither child saw Snape sink into a chair and put a shaking hand to his head. Dear Merlin. The prophecy. It was true. Potter was going to fulfill it. Harry jerked awake and lifted a hand to his scar. Voldemort was calling. Voldemort had called Harry for lessons at least once a week for the past month. He Occluded his mind and got out of bed. He dressed quickly and pulled out his robes and masks. He had run into very few Death Eaters and no one had questioned him yet. He focused on his magic and waved his hand, smiling to himself as an illusion of an oblivious Harry appeared in his bed. He was getting quite good at illusions. This one could roll over and groan when someone spoke to it. Luckily, Voldemort always told him to return before dawn and the portkey deposited him right back in his room. No one would ever know. He lowered his mask and hissed his password. He hated portkeys.

He landed with some semblance of grace and looked around. No one was really around. He picked his way through the graveyard (he gave the tombstone he had spent time tied to wide berth) and let himself into the house. He had learned his way quite well from his past experience here. Voldemort always met him in what Voldemort called the sitting room. Harry didn’t sit there. He collapsed there, more often than not, but he did not sit. He was about to knock on the door when a gruff voice stopped him and made his blood run cold. “We’re in here.” Harry turned. It looked like Voldemort was recruiting again. Harry did not know this person.

How to explain that he was there for lessons? The man would laugh at him. He gestured for Harry to follow him. Well, what choice did he have? Harry stepped across the hallway and entered the room. Voldemort was at the front of the room, petting Nagini and whispering to someone in, what else, Death Eater robes and masks. The Death Eater bowed and left Voldemort’s side. “My Death Eaters.” Voldemort hissed. “I welcome you all.” Harry had to wonder if all maniacs could make such nice speeches. “So many have been lost to Azkaban, but you all rose to the challenge presented to you and joined me to better

our world.” Harry tried not to smirk. He really did. “I’ve called you all here tonight to introduce you to someone.” Voldemort said as he lowered Nagini to the floor. “My student, call Nagini to you.” So, Voldemort did know that Harry was there. Harry had only handled Nagini once and he wasn’t too sure he liked her. Zen was much nicer.

“I’m here, Nagini.” Harry hissed obediently. The man next to him jumped in surprise and inched away from Harry. Nagini slid through the crowd and made her way to Harry. Harry offered his arm to the snake and she wrapped herself around it.

“My Death Eaters, please allow me to present my student to you.” Voldemort said as he motioned Harry forward. Harry had not known that Voldemort was planning on making an announcement. Harry stepped through the crowd (where had these people come from?) and approached Voldemort’s side. “His identity shall remain a secret for now, for his protection, of course. I need a few volunteers to instruct him but we can arrange that later.” Voldemort waved his wand and another chair appeared next to him, though it was smaller than Voldemort’s own. He waved Harry to his seat and then turned back to his Death Eaters. “How did the giants receive our latest offer?” He asked the crowd.

Harry lowered himself to his seat and allowed Nagini to slither back to Voldemort. Was this a bad or a good thing, this announcement of Voldemort’s student?

William Zareh climbed the stairs to Dumbledore’s office and kicked the door. He continued kicking until the door swung open. “William, my dear boy, what is it? Are you injured?”

“No, Headmaster. I’m fine.” Zareh said as he fought for breath. “I’ve just come from a Death Eater meeting.” Zareh told him. “Voldemort introduced someone tonight. He called him his ‘student’.” Zareh waved away the offers of tea and candy.

“Student?” Dumbledore said, vaguely troubled. “What did you make of him?”

“The student did not say anything that wasn’t in Parseltongue.” Zareh said.

“What?” Dumbledore demanded. The headmaster only knew of one other Parseltongue and that boy was being extremely stubborn in his insistence to stay in the Muggle world. “Did you see the student’s face?”

“No, Headmaster. He was well covered, but his manners screamed ‘pure –blood’.” Zareh said. “He carried himself like Lucius Malfoy.” Zareh admitted.

“Well, it can’t be Harry, then.” Dumbledore said with a large amount of relief.

“Harry? As in Harry Potter?” Zareh asked.

“Yes. Harry is the only other Parseltongue I know.” Dumbledore told Zareh.

“Someone from abroad, then? A new player?” Zareh asked in confusion. Harry Potter turn Dark? Become the Dark Lord’s student? Impossible.

“That sounds the most likely possibility. What else happened?” Dumbledore asked.

“The giants have refused Voldemort’s proposal. Actually, they picked the messenger up and pitched him a fair distance.” Dumbledore smiled at the image of a flying Death Eater. “He has sent a delegation to France to stir up support there. He has also asked for teachers for his student.” Zareh saw Dumbledore’s face and smiled. “I’m ahead of you. I offered my services in ‘any capacity’ the Dark Lord may desire. He seemed almost giddy by the idea that his student would be taught by a Hogwarts’ professor.”

“Get to know this student of his. See if you can get him to talk or confide in you. We cannot dismiss the possibility that this student is not willing. Help him if you can, William.” Dumbledore instructed.

“Certainly, Headmaster.” Zareh took his leave and Dumbledore returned to his bed. A student? The Dark Lord had a student? The situation had escalated. Harry needed to return to the wizarding world. Sensei stood in the corner of his student’s room and waited. The boy slept in the bed but Sensei knew that something was not right. Deshi slept differently. He knew his student. Dawn was just starting to tinge the sky when Sensei saw someone appear. He was dressed in a heavy black garment and something clattered to the ground as he dropped to his knees. The figure bent over and gasped quietly. He shuddered for a few minutes before he straightened up. A mask dropped to the floor and the hood fell from the face. Deshi. His student stood up slowly, using the bed for support until he gained his balance. The boy’s hands shook as he unfastened the cloak and folded it up. He moved to the dresser and shoved the cloak under clothing and the mask in another drawer.

Deshi returned to his bed and toed off his trainers. He had just pulled off his shirt and was inspecting a few new lashes when Sensei revealed himself. The boy’s head snapped up and his wand flew from the floor to his hand as he faced the unknown. “Calm, deshi.” Sensei said as he stepped out of the shadows.

“Sensei?” Harry had enough time to ask before his body arched in pain and he fell backwards into his bed. It seemed that his body had decided to lose consciousness. Sensei realized then that deshi was keeping many secrets from him. Sensei watched as the illusion faded away. He grabbed the blanket from the bed and wrapped his student in it. The boy would not leave his side until Sensei was satisfied.

Author’s Note: Wow. Just over eighteen pages. You have to admit, that was worth the wait!

Author's Note: Here's the next chapter! I hope you all enjoy!

Harry jerked away from the foul smell underneath his nose and coughed. Ugh. That was horrible, foul, and had no place being on the planet's surface. The smell reappeared under his nose again and he moved his head away. The movement was a mistake. His head started pounding. He moaned and the smell finally disappeared. "Deshi." Harry knew that voice. It was Sensei. What was Sensei doing here? Was it time to get up? Did they have a workout that morning? He forced his eyes open before slamming them shut again. It was too bright. Why was his room so bright? "Deshi." Sensei was being rather persistent this morning. Harry moved his hand up to his face to shield his eyes, ignoring the pain that it brought, and squinted at his teacher.

They were not in his room. They were in the locker room. Why were they here? Harry's body caught up with his mind then and he groaned. The pain was everywhere. Voldemort had not been kind that evening. "Cruel" would be close. Almost. It was a few steps down from what Voldemort had been doing. "Ow." Harry said in a whisper. Oh, yes. His voice was raw.

"Hope there's a good explanation coming." Sensei said as he removed the blanket covering Harry. He pulled Harry's arm down to his side and stared down at the boy. "You'll need it." Sensei warned him. "A stay in the infirmary will keep you where you are safe."

Harry's stomach sank as Sensei wrestled Harry's clothing off. Harry tried to help only once, but was forced to remain still by a somewhat fearsome glare. He knew that any other teacher would have reported him to the doctor and left him to the man's mercies, but Sensei appeared more than competent to care for Harry's injuries. Harry's brain processed what the man had said. Was he threatening Harry? With the infirmary? Ack!

Harry followed Sensei's instructions as Sensei cleaned the welts covering Harry's back, chest, arms, and legs. Harry was glad that nothing had really scarred. That would have been extremely difficult to explain in the long run. Harry tensed when Sensei applied the burning cream, as Harry called it. Sensei only grunted in reaction.

Sensei was really angry, then. He usually worried if Harry was in pain. Now, it seemed that he could care less if Harry was in pain. Sensei put down his the cream and wiped his hands on a clean towel. "Sit up." Sensei told Harry.

Harry pushed himself up from the table and faced his teacher. The man held out some pajamas. Harry pulled them on and waited for the other shoe to drop. "You have been going to the man who wants you dead." Sensei said quietly. "You have left the safety of the school and risked your life." Harry had heard varieties of this speech several times in his life, but this was the first time he felt like this. He had been upset before, but he had always felt right in doing what he did. He always had a reason and it had always worked. Everything turned out for the best. "I am very disappointed."

Harry started to take a deep breath, but stopped when his injuries pulled. He felt tears prickle in his eyes. He blinked them away and tried to keep calm. That hurt, the way Sensei had said that. "I-" Harry's fists opened and closed as he looked at his teacher. Just the way the man was looking at him seemed to scream displeasure. Harry had disappointed his teacher, the man who had promised to protect him and had protected him over and over. He had disappointed his teacher. "I, uh, I-" Harry didn't know what to say. He had no excuse other than "this is something I have to do." "I'm sorry." Harry finally said. He figured apology would be the best way to go now.

"Apology not accepted." Oh. That hurt worse than the disappointed statement. "Explain to me why." Sensei demanded. Sensei's glare pierced through Harry and made him think that the infirmary would have been the better option. He could deal with the Infirmary, right?

Harry dropped his gaze to his toes and fought away the shudders from the Cruciatus. He would not show any weaknesses right now. He couldn't let Sensei down. "I do have a reason." He said to Sensei. "I won't expect you to understand. I don't understand it myself." Harry pulled his legs up and sat in a cross-legged position. He rested his arms on his knees and stared off to his left. "Voldemort has access to my dreams. You already knew that. He has decided that I'm some sort of student. His student. He's teaching me things I wouldn't learn

at my school, or anywhere else that follows the law.” Harry explained. “I don’t know why he wants to teach me. I didn’t accept it. He just demands it. And I follow those demands.” Harry sighed and put his face in his hands.

“I don’t know why I continue to go.” Harry admitted. “I’ve been there quite a bit and now he’s arranged for outside tutoring. From his Death Eaters.” Harry shrugged carefully, mindful of one lash directly across his shoulder blade. “Tonight was a particularly bad lesson. I couldn’t keep the spells straight and he was upset.” Harry ran a hand through his hair and wished he had his pillow from Paul’s office. He jumped when the pillow appeared in his hand. Okay, accidental wandless magic without a strong wish for anything to happen. Odd. What is going on with my magic? Harry held onto his pillow and sighed. “I know I should stop going, but I learn so much from my time there.” He felt Sensei shift and he looked up. “Not bad things. How his organization works. Who reports to him and who does not. The layout of his hideout. How his mind works. Everything I’ve needed to know but could not find out is practically given to me now. I’m learning about him and how he works. I’m finding out the identities of the Death Eaters and learning their weaknesses. Everything I need but couldn’t get before.”

Harry glanced at his teacher and saw an unreadable expression on his face. It was blank. He appeared to be thinking. Harry waited. He didn’t want to upset his teacher any further than he had managed. “Sun Tzu. Have you heard of him?”

“No, Sensei.” Harry answered.

“He wrote a very famous book called ‘The Art of War’. He said ‘All warfare is based on deception’. It seems you are deceiving him?” Sensei asked. Harry wasn’t sure where this was going, but he gave a cautious nod. “You wish to know your enemy?” Harry gave another nod. “You know this is dangerous?”

“Yes.” Harry answered. “But it’s worth it.”

“How?” Sensei demanded. Harry paused. How to explain this?

“I can do this. No one else. Voldemort is allowing more and more information to come my way. I need to do this. For others. To protect them from Voldemort.” Harry stopped. He wasn’t helping his case. Sensei’s face was completely illegible and Harry had a feeling that blank face was hiding quite a bit of emotion. Harry jumped when Sensei started speaking again.

“An old adage says ‘Warriors fight for those who cannot’.” Okay. What does that mean? “You are such a person.” Sensei said. Oh. “Agree with your safety, I do not.” Sensei told him. “Danger, yes. There is plenty.” Sensei reached out a hand and rested it on Harry’s shoulder. He bent down and looked Harry directly in the eye. “You do what you must?”

“Yes, Sensei. This is something I must do.” Harry told him. Sensei searched Harry’s face for a few minutes.

“You have my help.” Sensei said shortly. “Inform me when it happens.” Sensei offered a hand to Harry. Harry took it and smiled at his teacher. “If it becomes too much, I will knock you unconscious and admit you to the infirmary.” Sensei warned. “There are ways of keeping you here.”

“I will let you know, Sensei.” Harry said quietly. He had a fair idea of what Sensei meant. Bug had told him stories of what the infirmary could be if a patient tried to harm himself while at St. Jude’s. Harry didn’t want that. Not at all. “I promise to be careful.”

Two more weeks passed for Harry. Paul had not cornered him and questioned him about his nocturnal lessons, so Harry guessed that his secret was safe with Sensei. The man had ordered Harry to show Sensei any new injuries and often had Harry sit out on classes if Sensei thought the wounds were too bad for Harry to participate. He had given Harry a book called *The Book of the Five Rings* by a famous swordsman from Japan. Harry had devoured it and found that the book could be applied to his life in several ways. Not that he was ready to bring some of those ideas into play. He would have to wait until the right time.

“007?” Jack said as he entered the lounge. Harry looked up from his drawing of Gryffindor tower and smiled at Jack. “Your aunt’s here, pal.”

“Thanks, Jack.” Harry packed up his art supplies and put them into his cubby before shouldering his bag and dashing down to the visitors’ lounge. He slid in the hallway and wondered if there was a regular schedule for waxing the floors. He stopped himself with the wall and went down the hall. He waved to Bug and dodged past a nurse carrying a box. He smiled at the lounge door and opened it to see his aunt. “Hi, Aunt Petunia.”

“Hello, Harry.” She said with a smile of her own. “You’re looking well.” She commented as he came up to her. Harry had no doubts he was looking well. Sensei was badgering him into eating, sleeping, and taking vitamins everyday.

“Thank you.” He answered. “Prove to me that you’re my aunt. Where did you find me when I had an unexpected visitor from my old school?” He asked, ready to bring out his wand if it proved necessary.

“I found you in a tree.” Petunia told him. “A little paranoid today, Harry?” She asked.

“Paranoia is my constant companion. It’s saved my life.” Harry shrugged. “Why are you here today?” He asked. Petunia usually only came during weekends, not during the week.

“Please sit down, Harry.” Petunia said in a serious voice. Harry’s face fell and he dropped into a chair. Aunt Petunia was being far too serious. “Your uncle and I have decided to separate for now.” She said calmly. Harry’s mind abruptly stopped and he stared at her. “It was nothing you did. It is not your fault.”

Harry stared at his aunt. She and Uncle Vernon had separated? His first thought made him feel a bit guilty, for he mentally cheered. No more Vernon! Woo-hoo! “Why?” Harry asked instead of cheering.

“He wasn’t the man I thought he was.” Petunia said simply. We decided it would be best to take a break to figure out what we both want from this marriage, or if we want to continue our marriage.” She shrugged. “It’s been coming for a long time now.” She told Harry. “He has found a flat and will live there until things are decided.”

“I thought...” Harry had been sure Petunia would leave Privet Drive, not Vernon.

“No, Harry. I own the house. I also bought a new car. I thought we would go out for lunch, if you would like that.” Petunia smiled at Harry and Harry couldn’t help but smile back.

“Does Paul know?” He asked. Getting out of St. Jude’s for an hour or two would be nice.

“Yes, he knows.” Petunia told him. “Is that a ‘yes’?” She asked as she stood up.

“That would be nice, Aunt Petunia.” Harry replied. “Let’s go. I’m starved.”

“Ah. You’re always starving. You know that, right?” She asked as she led the way outside.

“Yes. It’s normal though. Paul wants me to be normal.” Harry said to her. As normal as I can be with a psycho wizard after my head...no, wait. That’s changed. Psycho wizard who wants me to join him. Yeah, that’s completely normal.

Harry sat back from the table and sighed. Lunch had been a great idea. He snickered at Aunt Petunia’s look. “Hungry?” She asked.

“Not anymore.” Harry answered truthfully. “Thank you for lunch, Aunt Petunia.”

“Not a problem.” She answered. “Did you save any room for pudding?”

“No.” Harry said with a shake of his head. “Thank you. I can wait while you get yours.” He told her.

“Not today, I think.” She told him. “Ophelia made cheesecake yesterday. I had two pieces.” She confided.

“Oh. You’re so bad.” Harry smirked at her.

“Eh. It was celebration.” She answered. “Harry, I was wondering what plans you had for Christmas?” Harry stopped toying with his straw and looked up at her. He knew Christmas was only three weeks away.

“None yet.” He answered honestly. “I spent last Christmas with Sirius and all the other ones before that at school.” He told her.

“Would you consider coming home for Christmas this year?” She asked. Harry blinked at her in confusion. “Vernon won’t be there. Just the three of us. You, me, and Dudley.” Christmas at Privet Drive? Not having Uncle Vernon around would be nice. He wouldn’t have to worry about his uncle doing anything to embarrass him. Could he do it? Would he want to? Past experience told him ‘no’. Christmas had never been a thing Harry could find any joy in as a child. He hated the holidays when he was a child. He had preferred being in school, away from his family and their apparent enmity for his presence. “You don’t have to decide now.” She told him. “Let me know in a few days.”

“Okay.” Harry said. He couldn’t go back there for Christmas, could he? Would it be different with Vernon out of the house? “I’ll think about it.” He promised. Paul would help him think this through.

“Headmaster Dumbledore.” Fudge said as he stood to welcome his mentor during his first years in office. “What can I do for you today?” He asked as he ushered the elder into a chair. A tea service appeared on the table between them as Fudge took his own seat.

“Minister Fudge. You’re looking well.” Dumbledore said as he accepted a tea cup, flavored exactly the way he liked it.

“Yes. I’ve had young Mr. Weasley looking after me. He’s become invaluable to me.” Fudge admitted. “He makes sure I eat and pushes me out of the office if I’ve been here more than twelve hours a day.” Fudge looked at Dumbledore in a way that invited explanation. “Why are you here, Headmaster? I do not receive visits from you without some reason behind it.” He told Dumbledore with a jovial smile.

“I have some information about the Dark Lord. Information that I feel you need to know.” Dumbledore said with a grandfatherly twinkle to his eye.

“Information?” Fudge spluttered. “What kind of information?” He asked hurriedly. “What do I need to know?”

“My source has uncovered something the Dark Lord has yet to reveal to the public.” Dumbledore saw the panic in Fudge’s eyes. This was playing out exactly as he wished.

“What is it?” The minister practically gibbered.

Dumbledore soothed the man with a gesture and smiled. “It’s not too worrisome. Not yet, at least.” He admitted. “It is unsettling.” He said. “It seems that Voldemort,” he ignored the Minister’s flinch, “has found himself a student.” Dumbledore said calmly. He watched as the man across from him paled. Perfect. “This student of his speaks Parseltongue and is receiving tutoring from the Death Eaters themselves.”

“A student?” Fudge asked. “Is it a child?” He asked.

“A boy, yes. My source puts him at fifteen or sixteen years of age.” He told Fudge. “We cannot dismiss the idea that this boy is not doing this by choice.” Dumbledore warned him.

“You said he speaks Parseltongue?” Fudge latched onto the information and stared at Dumbledore. “The only known Parseltongues are Voldemort and Harry Potter. No one else.”

“My contact says that the student is not Harry Potter.” Dumbledore said confidently. “This boy, however, has not spoken any English around my source, so we do not know if he even speaks English. The source feels that the boy is foreign. He has promised to find out as much as possible, but it is a good idea now to be cautious.” Dumbledore said. “We don’t know what this student is capable of or what he is willing to do. It makes me afraid for those wizards who are outside the community.”

“You’re thinking of the Potter boy, aren’t you, Dumbledore?” Fudge asked the Headmaster. “I can’t tell you where he is, as I don’t know. He is well-protected though. His aunt has sent several Aurors running for their lives and Potter has bodyguards with him. I doubt he is able to shift in his sleep without someone knowing about it.” The two men fell deep into a conversation about the Boy Who Lived, oblivious to the ear just behind the door.

Author’s Note: Okay, so it was short. The next one will be longer. Promise. Thanks for reading!

Author's Note: Sorry for the long wait, guys. Writing about Christmas in July is hard! Christmas cookies to all!

Harry paused before he opened his car door. He and Paul had debated "going home for Christmas" until they were both tired of it. In the end, Harry had decided that he would go home, just to decide what life with this "new" Aunt Petunia would be like. "Okay?" Aunt Petunia asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Harry said as he fully opened the door. He pulled his duffle bag out of the back seat and followed his aunt up the walk. No, he wasn't nervous. Not at all. He just felt better knowing his wand was in the holster Sensei had made him and that the throwing darts were under wandless invisibility charms just inside his sleeves. Never mind that he knew Vernon would not be there. He just felt better. Safer. His paranoia was at new heights. I'm worse than Moony. He would be so proud. "I'm taking my bag upstairs, Aunt Petunia."

"All right. Come back down for lunch once you've unpacked." She told him as she hung up her coat.

"Okay." Harry said as he went up the stairs. No, not awkward at all here. Why did I agree to come? He stopped when he reached his door. It wasn't his door. There was no cat flap. No locks. It was an ordinary door. He stopped for a moment. Aunt Petunia had changed his door. There was even a little hand painted sign that said "Harry's Room" hanging from the doorknob.

Harry reached out a hand hesitantly and turned the knob. The door swung open easily and he stepped into his room. He could only stare at it, because it wasn't his room. Not anymore. Someone had changed it.

The walls had been painted a sky blue and light wispy clouds dotted the sky. His furniture had been replaced, too. Nothing looked like it would fall apart anymore. None of it was brand-new, but it all looked well-made and well-cared for in a comfortable sort of way. White curtains had replaced the dingy gray ones at the window. Hedwig was asleep on a carved corkscrew stand next to the window. A closer

inspection revealed full water and food dishes for his owl. He looked down at the desk and saw an envelope laying there. He opened it and pulled out a piece of writing paper.

Harry,

Hermione told me that you enjoy flying in the clouds. We can change it if you don't like it. The room is yours for as long as you want it.

Welcome home, Harry.

Aunt Petunia

Harry folded the letter back into its envelope. Hedwig woke up and hooted at Harry. "Hello, girl." Harry held up an arm and Hedwig landed on it. "Aunt Petunia still has some surprises left, doesn't she?" Harry asked her. Hedwig didn't answer.

Harry sent Hedwig back to her perch and left his room, deciding to unpack later. He went down the stairs and to the kitchen. His aunt was there, cooking something that smelled like vegetable soup. He waited until she turned around. "Thank you." He said quietly.

"You're quite welcome, Harry." She said simply, as though she had not painted Harry's room or made it homey for him. "Will you set the table for me? Just three spaces for soup and sandwiches."

"Sure." Harry said. This is weird. Requests, not orders. The meal was weird too. Harry had already sat down when Dudley finally made an appearance.

"Hi, Harry." Dudley said as he pushed back a chair and sat.

"Hi." Harry returned, wondering why this was so awkward.

"Can we talk later?" Dudley asked politely. Dudley polite? Did Voldemort win the war? No, I'm still alive.

“Um, sure.” Harry answered. What could it hurt? Both boys paused for a few minutes.

“Mum said you had a part in your school play. What was it?” That was a topic on which Harry could write a book. Lunch lasted through his recounting of the backstage antics, line memorization, Bevie’s attacks, rehearsals, make-up, and the costume crew’s stalker-esque behavior.

“Harry, you clear. Dudley, you rinse.” Dudley, doing chores? Harry checked again to see if the world was ending. Harry cleared the table as asked and was told to “go relax”. He did as he was told and retreated to his room.

“Feel like taking some letters out later, Hedwig?” Harry asked his owl. Hedwig actually looked excited by the prospect. Harry decided to get the magical world done and over with. He pulled out parchment and quill. He would write to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley first and go down the list from there.

He wrote to the Weasleys and assured them of his safety and well-being in the Muggle world. He mentioned that his aunt was taking excellent care of him and that he was enjoying school this year. He promised to see them as soon as he could and closed with a “Happy Christmas” to the entire Weasley clan. He wrote individual letters to Ron, Ginny, and the twins, as he knew none of them would be satisfied with just the information in the Weasley couple’s letter.

“Hedwig, can you handle all of this?” Harry asked uncertainly. Hedwig gave an affronted look and held out her leg. “Alright.” Harry tied the letters to her offered leg and opened the window for her. Harry watched her go and was surprised to find a small gray blur flitting around his room. “Pig?” Harry asked as he identified the owl doing its best to stay out of his reach. “Get down here, you silly owl.” Harry said as he held out his hand. The little owl stopped abruptly and flew down to Harry. “You have a letter for me?” He asked as he untied the parchment. Harry broke the seal and stared down at the angry script of his best friend.

Harry,

Do you have any idea how worried the Order is about you? There are a million ways to make contact, mate, and you did none of them. WE CAN'T PROTECT YOU IF WE DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE! One spell would have brought wizards to you, Harry. You're the Boy-Who-Lived. You wouldn't have been thrown out of Hogwarts because you called for help. Please, Harry, come back to Hogwarts where Dumbledore can keep you safe. The Dark Lord has a student now, Harry. It's only a matter of time before he comes for you. In the Muggle world. You're not safe there, Harry. Come back to Hogwarts where it is safe. For all our sakes.

Ron

"Et tu, Ron?" Harry asked the room. He couldn't believe Ron. Where did he get such ideas? The Protectors, no doubt. "Come back to Hogwarts where it is safe." Harry mimicked Ron. "You're the Boy Who Lived. We can't protect you if we don't know where you are." Harry clenched the letter in his fist and was unsurprised to find it catch fire. "Oh, bugger." He muttered to himself. He quenched the flames and took a deep breath to calm down. His magic, he hesitated to say it, but he knew it was true...was out of control. Severely. Just stay calm, Harry. It doesn't work if you stay calm. Harry started a deep breathing exercise and felt himself center again.

Harry moved to his desk and removed his last piece of parchment. He thought it was fitting. Anything else he had to write to the wizarding world would be done on Muggle stationary. He wondered if it was bad to get a strange satisfaction from that.

Ron,

Hogwarts is safe? Really. I've only nearly died there about...six times! Let's not forget the possessed teacher, the memory charm happy teacher, the dementors, the impersonated teacher, and the psycho teacher (psycho means mental, if you're wondering). I've had students mock me, students think I'm mental, students be afraid of me, and students who practically worshipped me. I've been attacked by political figures and reporters. I've had to be a protected child, a

Tri-wizard champion, an attention-seeking kid, and a punching bag for the Ministry. Do you know what I am now?

No one. Just Harry. That's it. I don't have to follow anyone's desires but my own in a way I have not managed since coming to Hogwarts. Do you know what, Ron? I like it. I like being "just Harry". No, more than that. I enjoy it. I revel in it. It's almost intoxicating to just be myself. No one has tried to kill me; I've not uncovered any plot or plan to harm me. Nothing. Just Harry. No one else.

I know the Old Crowd's been worried, but to be blunt, they are not my guardians. Aunt Petunia is my guardian and I have to listen to her until I'm seventeen, no matter what I think of her decision. Yes, I hated my new school at the beginning, but I like it now and plan to return to finish out the school year. I might even finish school there. Imagine this: no one has plotted against me, stared at me, or tried to kill me. Paradise. I am well-protected because no one knows who I am. Just Harry. Nothing else.

You're my best mate, Ron, but you can't expect me to come back to Hogwarts just because you want me there, so I can...how did you put it?... be kept safe. Thanks, but no thanks. I'm protected through anonymity. I am safe because no one knows who I am. Just leave me be.

Harry

Harry tied the letter to Pig's leg and allowed the owl to leave. A knock on the door startled him. "Come in." Harry said as he took a deep breath. Dudley poked his head around the door.

"Do you have a minute?" Dudley asked.

"Sure. Have a seat." Harry said, gesturing to his bed. Dudley perched on the end of it and Harry had a flash of insight. Dudley was nervous. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"You know I've been going to a doctor, too." Dudley started.

“Yeah. We wrote to each other about that.” Harry said calmly.

“Well, Joe told me a few things about myself. He said Mum and Dad spoiled me...a lot. And that I was really mean to you.” Dudley stopped for a minute. Harry knew what Dudley was trying to say, but that didn’t mean he would make it easy on his cousin. “I was wondering if we could start over?” Dudley asked.

“Start over?” Harry had been expecting an apology. Not this.

“Yeah, I’m sorry for what I did.” Ah, there was the apology. “I hope we can start over, because Joe pointed out that besides Aunt Marge, you’re my only family. I don’t want to be alone when Mum and Dad die, and I think you need some family too. I would like to be family to you.” Dudley sighed. “Never mind. I’ve messed it up.”

“No.” Harry said, stopping Dudley from leaving. “I understood you.” Harry hadn’t known that Dudley could actually speak in coherent sentences. “Okay. We can do that.” Well, if we’re apologizing here... “I’m sorry for threatening you with magic.”

“You couldn’t really.” Dudley said with a smirk. “You would have been thrown out of school.”

“No. But it felt good.” Harry admitted.

“Friends?” Dudley asked.

“Friends.” Dudley offered his hand and Harry shook it. “Want to play some computer games?” He asked. Harry had always wanted to play one.

“Only if I get to show you wizard chess later.” Harry said as he followed his cousin. “The pieces move and talk.”

“That is something I have to see.” Dudley said. Harry listened to Dudley as he explained how to play on the computer. Harry couldn't believe it. Some of these games required actual thought! Who knew?

“Christmas!” Harry pulled his blanket over his head and moaned. So what? His bed was soft and warm, the blanket blocked out light, and...something smelled good. “Harry! Wake up! It's Christmas!” Dudley said as he knocked on the door.

“Mm.” Harry was not yet coherent, much less conscious. Harry tried to open his eyes when he heard his door open.

“Harry.” Dudley said from the doorway. “Wake up.”

“No.” Harry snapped from under his blanket. Harry jumped as Dudley pulled his blanket away. “Dudley. Can't you let me sleep?”

“Not on Christmas.” Dudley said. “Get up now.”

“You're mean.” Harry whined. Okay, so it wasn't the most biting or intelligent comment he'd made, but it was better than turning Dudley into a toad. He blamed it on being tired.

“Let's go. I'm giving you five minutes to get downstairs.” Dudley left the room and Harry mumbled some quite derogatory remarks about his cousin. His teenage stomach kicked him and he finally found the energy to move. He stumbled into the bathroom and down the stairs with only a few minutes to spare. He reached the kitchen door and somehow the door moved about ten centimeters to the left. Harry hit the wall.

“Stupid wall.” Harry muttered to himself.

“Is that you, Harry?” He heard Aunt Petunia say from the kitchen.

“Yeah.” Harry answered, successfully managing the door. He went into the kitchen and dropping into his seat. “Morning.” He said to the room in general.

“Good morning, Harry.” A male voice said. It took a moment for Harry to process it. It wasn’t Dudley. It wasn’t Vernon. It wasn’t Paul, Sensei, or anyone from St. Jude’s.

“Remus?” A warm chuckle told him his guess was correct.

“I invited Mr. Lupin for Christmas.” Aunt Petunia said with a smile as she put a bowl of scramble on the table.

“You couldn’t warn me, Dud?” Harry asked as Remus mussed his hair.

“No.” Dudley said, completely disinterested as he poured himself some juice.

“Traitor.” Harry muttered to his cousin.

“Heir to the Potter and Black families, owner of three companies, actor, and you still can’t manage to wake up in the morning?” Remus said as he dished out breakfast to Harry.

“I’m the Boy Who Lived.” Harry said sarcastically. Remus and Petunia both snickered at the comment. “I deserve extra sleep.”

“Sure, kiddo. Whatever you say.” Remus rolled his eyes and poured juice for Harry while Petunia sat down. “How’d you fit in the kitchen this morning with that ego?”

“Magic.” Harry said with a shrug. That comment made Dudley spray his juice. “No, let me get it.” Harry told his aunt. He waved his hand and the juice disappeared. “Presto.” Harry said with a smile.

“Remind me to yell at you later.” Remus said.

“Okay, Remus. Pass the toast, please.” Remus passed the toast while Harry laughed to himself. He loved surprising people. Especially Remus.

Harry sat surrounded by packages and had to wonder where to start. Remus had checked every package under the tree and had deemed most of them safe. Two of them had tracking charms on them, and two were a portkey. No surprise that they were from Ron, Dumbledore, Moody, and the Weasleys. He had a feeling that the Weasleys didn't actually know about the portkey, but Ron would have known. He knew Ron allowed it, especially after that letter.

Remus finally lost patience with Harry staring at his packages. He reached out and handed one to Harry. "Start with mine." He told the dazzled boy.

"You didn't have to." Harry said hesitantly.

"I wanted to. Your family trust pays me enough to spoil you everyday for the rest of my life." Remus told him. "Now, learn from your cousin and follow his example." Remus said as he pointed at Dudley. Harry glanced at Dudley, who was practically burrowing through his presents.

Harry started on Remus's wrapping job and wondered if he had wrapped the box by hand or by wand. "Wow, Remus!" Harry said in surprise. Remus had given him an entire art set, complete with brushes and a palette. No more mixing paints on a dinner plate.

"I agree with Hermione. I'll encourage any hobby that does not include bodily harm." Remus said. "You have more than one package, you know." He told Harry when Harry seemed quite content to memorize the items in his art case.

"Oh, right." Harry said as he carefully set aside the case and reached for the next box. He found himself surrounded by books, clothing (all his size and nicely made), and art supplies. His cousin had somehow grown a brain and gave him two books: A History of Theatre and Fighting for the Stage. Harry's own gift to Dudley was well-received. Dudley loved his customized boxing gloves and was excited to hear of the lifetime warranty. Aunt Petunia received a spa

weekend from Harry and Dudley had jumped in with Harry to give his mother a new robe and slippers for when she took that spa weekend.

“This is the last one, Harry.” Petunia told him as she handed him an envelope. Harry did not notice his family and Remus exchanging glances, or the camera Remus suddenly brought out. Harry turned over the envelope several times, trying to find some clue about its contents.

“Just open it, Harry.” Remus advised. He readied the camera and waited.

Harry slid a finder under the flap and broke the seal. He found a note card with his aunt’s writing.

Harry,

This card is good for one school trip to London. You are expected to learn quite a bit while at the theatre and I fully expect you to act like the sixteen year old you are. Just don’t eat too many sweets. Please stay close to your teachers. Happy Christmas, nephew.

Love,

Aunt Petunia

“Really?” Harry asked excitedly as a camera went off in his face. “I can go?” Harry said once the afterimage faded.

“You can go.” Petunia told him with a smile.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” Harry leapt from his seat and threw his arms around his aunt. He then moved to Remus and hugged him too. “I know you had something to do with this!” He said to Remus. “This is great!” He said, practically dancing in place. “I- I’ve got to call Bug!”

“Call him tomorrow.” Petunia said as she laughed.

“Oh. Okay.” Harry said. “I’ve got to pack!” He exclaimed as he started for the door.

“It’s not for two weeks.” Remus said. “Calm down, Harry. You can write Hermione with the good news later. For now, I think you and your cousin need to get dressed.” Remus said as he messed up Harry’s hair again.

“Okay.” Harry said calmly. Harry and Dudley looked at each other. “Last one there gets cold water!” Harry said as he dashed from the room. Dudley followed Harry at something that resembled a run.

“They never truly grow up, do they?” Remus asked Petunia.

“I hope they never have to.” Petunia said as she started clearing up the paper. Remus rolled his eyes and waved his wand. The paper disappeared and the packages stacked themselves neatly. “Thank you, Remus. Eggnog?”

“Sounds wonderful.” Remus said as he followed her into the kitchen. Christmas dinner was large enough to make Harry think of the Burrow. He ate enough to satisfy his aunt and was dragged outside by Remus and Dudley to play in the snow, of all things. They started to make a snowman, but they quickly descended into an all-out snowball fight. Harry managed to hold his own, even fighting against Remus and Dudley.

A bright camera flash blinded him for a second. “Mr. Potter! Why did you leave Hogwarts?” Harry knew then that he was facing a subspecies of wizard. Reporters. On Christmas. This is low.

“Boys, let’s go inside now.” Remus whispered as he nudged Harry and Dudley towards the door.

“Mr. Potter? Don’t you feel safe at Hogwarts?” One reporter shouted after him. “What about You Know Who?” Harry shut the door on the tiny mob and leaned against it.

“What was that all about?” Dudley asked Harry and Remus.

“You know that I’m famous in the wizarding world.” Harry told Dudley.

“Yeah, but I didn’t believe you.” Dudley told him.

“Well, that’s what it was all about. I don’t show my face often enough to please everyone, so I guess the reporters are getting a bit ruthless.” Harry explained. “Remus, is there a way to keep reporters away from my house?” Harry asked.

“They should not have been here in the first place.” Remus said as he checked outside through the curtains.

“What can we do?” Harry did not want reporters camped out in front of his house. This was his holiday vacation, his first, with his family and he did not want anything to ruin it.

“Do you think Hedwig is up for a trip?” Remus asked.

“I think she might be. She seemed bored last night.” Harry told him.

“Let’s draft a few letters, then. The minister, the Daily Prophet, and your family’s solicitor.” Remus said thoughtfully. “That should be enough.”

“My family has a solicitor.” Harry asked as he started up the stairs. He stopped and turned back to his cousin. “Are you okay, Dudley?”

“Fine. They’re easier to handle than those Dementy things.” Dudley said calmly.

“True. They’re not that far apart though.” Harry said with a smile. “Just stay inside until they’re gone.”

“No problem.” Dudley told his cousin. “I’ll ask Mum to make some hot chocolate.” Dudley said as he walked towards the kitchen.

“Sounds good.” Harry said as his cousin disappeared. “You said I had a solicitor.” Harry reminded Remus as they reached Harry’s room.

“Two actually, one for Potter and one for Black.” Remus told him with a smile. “Both want to meet you when you have the free time.” Remus informed him.

“Set up the meetings for Monday. I go back to school the next day.”

“Very well.” Remus said in agreement. Harry and Remus spent thirty minutes drafting letters before Remus had to transfigure some parchment. “What happened to that stationery I got you?” Remus asked, slightly put out that Harry didn’t have it.

“Um, well....some of the guys found it and it made really good paper airplanes and we were really, really bored and-“

“Enough. Just make sure you keep some at home too, okay?” Remus said as he lowered his wand.

“I’ll do that. Thanks.” Harry said. He gathered the letters together and told Hedwig where to go. Hedwig barely gave him time to tie the letters to her leg before she took off.

Harry snuck back down to the living room and peered through the gap in the curtains. The reporters and photographers were milling around outside, talking to each other. Harry had to roll his eyes. He hated reporters. And interviews. And photographers.

“Harry!” Aunt Petunia called him from the kitchen.

“Coming, Aunt Petunia!” Harry called as he left the window. The reporters could stand outside and freeze. He wouldn’t let them spoil Christmas.

Harry could hardly sit still. He smoothed his new shirt down and stood to pace. It was Boxing Day and Uncle Vernon was coming over to pick up Dudley. Harry didn’t want to see the man, but he knew it

would be brief, if at all. He had one thing to look forward to today. His friends were coming over.

Hermione had arranged the whole thing. Ginny and Luna were invited to Hermione's house for a sleepover, though she did say little actual sleeping happened at those. Neville Longbottom had been invited over for "tutoring". The entire group would then move to Harry's house.

The doorbell rang and Harry raced to the door. "Harry!" Hermione said as she stepped in. "Padfoot pranks, by the way." She said as she began shedding her heavy winter layers.

"Harry!" Ginny and Neville practically launched themselves at Harry and nearly took him to the ground.

"Hello, Harry." Luna said as she came up behind Neville. "It's good to see you aren't dead." Harry's lips quirked at the comment by one of his more eccentric friends.

"Hi, Luna." Harry said through his laughter. "It's good to see you all. Please, let me take your coats."

"As long as I get it back." Luna said with a shrug. "I'll need it when I leave."

"No problem." Harry said as he hung the coats up. "I'll make sure you get it back." Harry motioned for his friends to follow him.

"Harry, was that –" Dudley stopped halfway down the stairs and stared. "Uh-" Harry could see his cousin's brain come to a stop and die. "Er-" Harry followed Dudley's line of sight and saw him staring at Luna. His cousin? And Luna? "Uh-"

"Hello, Harry's cousin." Luna said sweetly.

"Sorry, Dudley. That wasn't your dad. Just my friends. This is Hermione, Ginny, Neville, and Luna." He introduced them. "Guys,

Dudley Dursley, my cousin.” Harry watched Dudley’s brain come back to life.

“It’s nice to meet you.” He squeaked. “I’ve heard a bit about you.” Dudley said. Harry hadn’t known Dudley could actually be polite when it suited him.

“All good, I hope.” Hermione said with a grin as she hugged Harry.

“Yes.” Dudley answered. Harry noticed Dudley’s eyes move back to Luna. “All good.”

The doorbell rang again and Harry gave a quick glance to the door before ushering his friends into the sitting room. Dudley headed towards the door but found himself blocking Luna’s way. He danced around her before giving Luna a nervous smile and managing to move towards the door.

“I think your cousin likes Luna.” Hermione whispered.

“I think you’re right.” Harry answered.

“Hermione’s always right.” Ginny and Neville said at the same time.

Luna stepped into the sitting room at that moment. She looked at all of her friends, noticed them staring at her, and blinked. “What?” She asked, looking around. “It’s a Banackcha, isn’t it? I thought one was following me.”

Harry had changed for bed and was ready to climb under his blankets when someone knocked on the door. “Come in.” He said, wondering who it was. “Oh, hi Aunt Petunia.” He said once he saw his guardian standing there.

“Hello, Harry. Almost ready for bed?” she asked.

“Yes. It was a long day. I forgot how tiring my friends could be.” Harry said with a grimace. His exhaustion was a mix of two things: his friends and holding his magic in check around his friends. He had noticed his magic flaring around lunchtime and it only got worse as

time went on. He had excused himself to get a hold of his magic and had kept a tight rein on it the rest of the day.

“Dudley seems quite taken with Luna.” Petunia told him.

“Yeah. I noticed that.” Harry said with a smile. Dudley had asked a few questions about Luna once he came home from his father’s place. “He does know she’s a witch, right?” Harry had to be sure about that.

“Oh, yes. He asked me what I thought. I told him that the only thing that mattered was happiness.”

“What would Uncle Vernon say?” Harry had to know. Vernon had been a part of their lives for so long.

“I don’t think it matters. We can have some magic now.” Petunia said with a smile. Harry returned it and resisted the urge to hug her. “Oh, look at the time. After midnight. Into bed with you, young man!” Petunia said with a fake sternness.

“Yes, ma’am!” Harry laughed and climbed into bed. Petunia reached down and ruffled his hair. She arranged the blankets around him. Harry realized what it was. His aunt had just tucked him in. He smiled up at her. “Aunt Petunia?” he said as she started for the door.

“Yes, Harry?”

“I’m glad I came home for Christmas.” He said in a content voice.

“I’m glad you came home, too.” She said as she turned out the light. “Goodnight, dear.”

“Night.” Harry said as he closed his eyes. Petunia shut his door and Harry heard her walk away. It was nice to be home. What’s that noise? Harry thought to himself. Something had brought him out of sleep. What is that? Harry reached out a hand to summon his glasses as his brain caught up with him. It couldn’t be...A quick wave of his hand turned on his light and revealed a distraught

Kreacher standing at the foot of his bed. "Kreacher?" he asked, unable to keep his incredulity out of his voice. This couldn't be the same elf. This one looked sane.

"Master has not come to see Kreacher!" The elf all but wailed. "Kreacher prepared for his new Master, cleaned Master's home from top to bottom, prepared the Master's room, and still Master has not come! Kreacher is a bad elf! Bad Kreacher!" Kreacher knelt on the floor. "Bad Kreacher! Bad Kreacher!"

"Kreacher, stop it." Harry said calmly.

"Bad Kreacher!" Kreacher bashed his head once more.

"Kreacher, stop punishing yourself." Harry told him. Kreacher stopped and lay on the ground, panting harshly.

"Harry, what's that noise?" Aunt Petunia asked as she knocked.

"It's okay. You can come in." He told her. She opened the door and stepped in. "It's my house elf." He explained. "Could you call Remus?" he asked. "I think I might need his advice."

"Certainly." She said, eyeing the little creature on the floor.

"Thanks." Harry said as Kreacher started to bang his head again. "Kreacher, stop banging your head!" Kreacher was acting...well, stranger than normal. "Kreacher, would you like something to do?"

"Master would give Kreacher something to do?" Kreacher asked with wide and hopeful eyes.

"Yes. My bestiary is in my trunk. Could you find it for me, please?" Harry watched as the elf began rummaging through his trunk. He heard rushed footsteps not a minute later and a very disheveled Remus burst into the room with his wand drawn.

“You’ll not hurt Master!” Kreacher said vehemently with Harry’s requested book held over his head like a weapon.

“Hi, Remus.” Harry said calmly. “You can put your wand away. Kreacher won’t hurt me.” Harry shrugged. His life would never be normal, would it?

“How do you know?” Remus demanded, not lowering his wand. He ignored Kreacher’s assertions that Remus would not hurt ‘Master’.

“My magic.” Harry said simply. It was amazing. One day, it was out of control and the next he could feel it almost speaking to him, warning him of danger (honestly, stairs were not that dangerous) and whispering of his safety.

“Oh.” Remus said. He couldn’t argue with something like that. “It’s okay, Petunia.” Remus said as he stepped out into the hallway.

“Kreacher, this is Remus Lupin, my mentor, advisor, and friend.” Harry told the elf. Remus came back into the room and sat on the bed. “What do you know about elf and master relationships?” Harry asked. He had a suspicion about a few things.

“Some.” Remus admitted. “It’s usually for life, until one or the other dies. Elves know their master’s needs and wants as well as they know their own. Their well-being is tied directly to that or their master’s, their own magic is bolstered by their master’s power...” Remus trailed off. His eyes told Harry that he had an epiphany. “I can’t believe we didn’t see it.”

“You came to the same conclusion?” Harry asked.

“I think almost everyone forgot, or refused to see, the mental state Sirius was in. That would explain a few things.” Remus said sadly.

“Like Kreacher’s actions.” Harry agreed.

“Mistress Black was so much stronger than Master Black. So much more powerful. Kreacher had to, Master!” Kreacher started to wail again. “Bad Kreacher!”

“Kreacher!” Harry said sharply. “Stop punishing yourself.” Harry ordered the little creature. Kreacher stopped his head bashing mid bash and looked up at Harry. “You are not to punish yourself unless I order it. Understood?”

“Yes, Master.” Kreacher said, wiping his eyes on the new tea towel he wore.

“I understand that you had to do what was ordered. I will not punish you for following directions.” Harry told the elf. “And please, call me Harry.”

“Of course, Master Harry!” Well, if that was the best the elf could do, Harry would leave him to it.

“Would you like to meet my family?” Harry asked the elf.

“Kreacher would be honored.” He said with the vaguest hint of hero worship.

“You can come in now, Aunt Petunia.” Harry called out to her.

“How did you know I was out there?” She asked as she opened the door.

“Magic.” Harry told her. Remus gave out a little chuckle as Harry introduced the house elf to Petunia.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Remus asked when he noticed Harry go pale.

“Hermione’s going to kill me.” He said calmly. “I own a house elf.” Harry buried his face in his hands.

“Hermoninny will not harm Master Harry!” Well, it looked like Harry had received a rather protective house elf, so much so that it would protect his master against the reformers who wanted to help the house elf. The irony, Remus thought. He had a feeling Harry would become a house guest of his if Hermione ever did find out. No matter. He had a guest room ready if he should need it.

Author's Note: Hehe. I can't wait. I know what's coming! Woo!

Author's Note: Happy Birthday wishes to Keres Weiland! Here's the next installment. Enjoy!

Harry woke up from...something. Not another noise. He started to roll over when his sleep-lagged brain told him something he wasn't ready to believe. He was floating in the air. What? He dropped into his bed from three feet above it as soon as he realized that he was in fact above it. He sat up and looked around. Note to self: Gain control of your magic soon. He sat up and looked around for the noise that had caused such a wonderful wake up. He knew it wasn't Kreacher, because he had sent Kreacher with Remus. He would have let Kreacher stay with his aunt, but it made Aunt Petunia uncomfortable to see a small creature popping in and out of rooms. The noise came again from the window. A grey owl was sitting on the branch outside, peering in at Harry as though to say "feel like opening this window?" Harry called up his magic to see if there were any spells or portkeys on the owl or the message it carried. Nothing. Who is sending me messages in the middle of the night?

Harry opened the window and the owl flew in. It came to a rest on Harry's desk. "Thank you." Harry said as he removed the note from the owl. "Help yourself to water. Hedwig is always happy to share." The owl left the desk and perched next to Hedwig, looking very pleased with himself.

Harry turned on his desk light and inspected the envelope. It only had his address penned on the front in plain ink, not something Harry had come to expect from the wizarding world. The handwriting looked familiar, but Harry couldn't place where he had seen it. He broke the seal and opened the page.

Harry,

I know I'm probably the last person you want to hear from, but I couldn't let this pass. My loyalty is to the Ministry, not a certain person. The Minister is not making very good decisions concerning you or your safety. I felt the need to inform you what is happening.

Minister Fudge and Dumbledore met today and spent a lot of time talking about you. Dumbledore managed to receive the Minister's

permission to remove you from the Muggle world if You-Know-Who becomes too aggressive. The level of aggressiveness is open to Dumbledore's interpretation, of course, because he knows more about You-Know-Who than any other wizard.

Dumbledore told the Minister that You-Know-Who has found a student. Dumbledore does not know who this student is, but he feels that the student may or may not be doing this of his free will. I do know that the student is a Parseltongue. The source (I'm assuming it's a Death Eater spy) thinks the student is foreign. The most important is the fact that no one knows what the student looks like. Be on your guard.

I know you don't like me. I don't blame you. My family considers you one of their own, and I'm just starting to realize that you belong to me, too. Take care of yourself and keep an eye out for danger. The magical world and Ministry has failed you one too many times. I refuse to contribute to that failure any longer. I will contact you again if there is any further information you need to know.

Percy Weasley

Harry lowered the page and sighed. So Dumbledore is still unwilling to concede, is he? Harry thought as he dug for some paper. His hands finally found his paper and pens.

Percy,

Thank you for the information. I will take appropriate action. Your secrets are safe with me. Take care of yourself.

Harry

"Could you take a return message?" Harry asked the grey owl. The owl bobbed its head, took the letter, and flew out the window. Harry shivered and shut the window with a wave of his hand. He lowered his head to the desk and wondered why his life was so screwed up.

The reporters were actually carted away by Aurors disguised as Muggle police officers. The Daily Prophet had issued a written

apology to Harry, explaining that they had forbidden any reporters from appearing at Harry's house, but could not guarantee what independent reporters and photographers would do. They did promise not to buy any photographs or stories about Harry from anyone not employed at the Daily Prophet. Remus had said that the Prophet was doing a classical rendition of "Oops! We were caught!" Harry had to agree with him.

The visit to the solicitors' offices went better than Harry had expected. The Potter family's solicitor was a middle-aged woman that reminded Harry a bit of his aunt. She had this no-nonsense approach towards everything that put Harry at ease. So the world was falling down around her? Oh well. She was meeting Harry Potter? That's nice. Lord Voldemort walked through her front door? Oh dear. She would go out the back. He spent two hours with her while she told him exactly what she did for the Potter family. Remus had control of the business aspect of things, yes, but she made sure that Remus was doing everything within the bounds of law. She was also capable of bringing charges against anyone Harry wished. It was an odd feeling, that someone would do something like that, just because Harry asked. She also told him a few stories about his parents. It appeared that his mother controlled his father's prankish behavior whenever the two were out in public. He had chuckled at that. He had heard that his mother had a forceful personality, but the idea that his father needed to be told to sit down and behave himself like a child! He was only glad that he hadn't been told that since he was...oh, about three.

The second solicitor was a rather jocular fellow who was oh so pleased to meet Harry at last. He couldn't believe that this man worked for the Black family until the solicitor confided that Sirius Black had chosen him over the "lad's" (Sirius was a lad compared to this man) mother's choice, who was a "rather crotchety man not suited to the legal profession". He had plied Harry with tea and biscuits until Harry was sure he would never eat again. The solicitor didn't bother listing his responsibilities to the Black family; he just gave Harry a roll of parchment that recorded all of his duties, should Harry need something along those lines.

He jerked as his scar gave a quick lance of pain and then started throbbing in time with his pulse. He sighed. He really didn't want to

see Voldemort right now. He stood and went to his bag to dig out his robes and mask. He laid them on the bed and pulled on some of his new clothes and shoes (it wouldn't be a good idea to appear in pajamas!). He replaced his glasses for his contacts. The robes settled on his shoulders and the mask went on before he hissed his password.

No one was around when he appeared in the graveyard. His magic flared around him, trying to tell him something. There was a teacher here? What did that mean? He paused, a line of Percy's letter coming into his head. The most important fact is that no one knows what the student looks like. They also thought that the student was foreign. Harry smirked as he raised his hand to his hair. He felt magic settle on it. He pulled out a strand and found that it was dirty blond. Perfect. Now for the eyes. He concentrated, not sure exactly what he was doing. His magic flared up and asked what he wanted. He managed to figure out that he wanted a temporary color change to last until the morning and he felt a slight tingle in his eyes. He conjured a mirror and stopped. His scar would give him some problems. He lengthened his hair until it covered his forehead and then used a slight sticking charm to get the closest layer to stick to his forehead. Perfect. He gave a toothy grin, shook his head at his own silliness, and entered Voldemort's lair.

He went to the usual meeting place and found Voldemort waiting for him. Harry stopped just inside the doorway and frowned. There was someone else waiting with Voldemort. The robes and mask were still on. Who was it?

"Ah, my student." Voldemort said when he saw Harry standing there.

"Good evening, sir." Harry answered, giving his voice a slight accent. The drama club had practiced accents before the Christmas holidays had started. Professor Bevington told Harry never to accept a role that offered a French accent, because Harry couldn't really produce one. His French accent sounded like a mix between French, German, and Spanish. He just couldn't remember the sounds or keep them straight. Harry figured that this would confuse anyone listening. He wasn't going to give anyone any clues at all about his identity.

Voldemort gave him an amused look but didn't say anything. "This is Professor William Zareh." Voldemort said as he motioned to the other one in the room. "He is Hogwarts' Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. He has offered to tutor you, my student." Voldemort said as he beckoned Harry closer.

Harry walked into the room and kept an eye on the professor. Voldemort nodded to the man and Zareh started removing his heavy outer robes and his mask. Harry stopped next to Voldemort and cocked his head to the side to study his new "teacher". Voldemort reached out and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Remove your robes and mask." Voldemort said to his student. Harry's head whipped around so fast that he was sure that he would be sore the next morning. "Now, my child."

Your funeral. Harry thought as he reached up and removed his mask. Voldemort reached out a hand and took it from Harry. He reached out a spidery hand and undid the clasp at Harry's throat. Harry had to fight every instinct not to pull away from him. Having Voldemort's hand near his throat brought back unpleasant memories of his first year. Harry slipped out of his robes and folded them over his arm. Voldemort started to make a choking noise next to him. Harry looked over with a puzzled look on his face. "Sir?" He wasn't sure, but he thought he might have given Voldemort a heart attack. More importantly, was it fatal?

Voldemort crushed Harry's dream in the next instant by letting out a burst of laughter which slowly turned maniacal. "You are full of surprises!" Voldemort said in Parseltongue, his pleasure (and pride?) showing through in his voice.

"I had a feeling that I would need a disguise tonight." Harry returned with a, well, not smile. It was a smirk. Oh dear. He was actually smirking.

"Zareh," Voldemort said as he motioned the man towards the throne. The man moved forward and knelt in front of Voldemort. "This is my student, the young Dark Lord. Let's call him 'Tom' for now." Oh, that's

just hysterical. That's really funny, Voldemort. Watch me rolling on the ground. Young Dark Lord 'Tom'. How ignoble. Harry restrained himself and fought the slight homicidal tendency he found rising within him. The man had to make jokes, didn't he?

Voldemort motioned for Zareh to rise. "Teach him well. He is a good student, if a little stubborn from time to time. He's no stranger to heavy discipline. Do not be afraid to use it." Harry shot a glance at the man who lived to torture him. Why couldn't Voldemort do things like lines or cleaning? Why did it have to be the Cruciatus curse? "I will, however, hold you responsible if he is permanently damaged." Voldemort warned the teacher.

"I will do my best, my Lord." The words settled over Harry and he fought a shudder. Did Dumbledore know the man could sound so evil?

"See that you do." Voldemort said. "Obey him and learn well, Tom."

"Yes, sir." Harry answered in English. The night was going to be stressful enough for the man in front of him. He didn't want to add anymore than necessary. That didn't mean he couldn't play with him a bit.

"I have designated a room at the end of the hall as your classroom." Voldemort told them. "Return here after you are done." Harry nodded to Voldemort and followed the Death Eater out of the room.

Their "classroom" was just a large room with very little furniture. There was a table and two chairs, a few books about the Dark Arts (and not the defense), and a few targets on the wall. "Have a seat, my Young Lord." Zareh said as he waved to one of the chairs.

"You do not have to call me that, Professor." Harry said as he slipped into the role of foreign student. "Tom," He almost gagged. "is fine."

"I have a feeling that the Dark Lord would not be happy about that." Zareh said as he sat down across from Harry.

“It does not matter. I ask you to call me by ‘Tom’.” Harry said simply. “My Lord will not be happy, but he will not distress.” Zareh blinked at the odd word choice. “Is that not right?” Harry asked. He was having fun with this role. Toying with Dumbledore’s spy would be a lot of fun. One of his more challenging roles, at the very least.

“I think you were looking for the word ‘worry’?” Zareh suggested.

“Yes, worry.” Harry said with a smile. The man actually smiled back at him. Zareh looked him over (making Harry suspicious) and seemed to come to some sort of decision.

“I will call you ‘Tom’ if you call me ‘William’.” Zareh said with a smile. Harry’s own faded and he regarded the teacher.

“Only if you do not tell him.” Harry said with a jerk of his head in the direction of Voldemort’s throne room.

“Deal.” Zareh extended his hand for a shake. Harry looked at his hand. He knew Voldemort’s wards would not allow anyone to take Harry out of them. He felt the wards drop around him every time he appeared here. He wouldn’t be able to leave until Voldemort raised them for him. Harry reached out his hand (it didn’t tremble, did it?) and shook Zareh’s hand. “Now, what do you know about the Unforgivable Spells?” Zareh said as he pulled a book towards him.

Harry stumbled as his portkey deposited him too close to his desk for comfort. He was amazed that he escaped that night without a single Cruciatus cast on him. A few lashes had been dealt out, which Zareh had watched without a single noise of protest or flinch. Harry had flinched, but not that much. He hated to say it, but he was getting used to the feeling and was finding it easier to ignore it. Zareh’s eyes told Harry that he hated to see it and stand by to allow it to happen. Harry smirked as he dropped his mask and robes into his bag. Dumbledore had chosen a good spy. The man had only slipped when Voldemort’s attention was on ‘student’.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was noticeably empty during the Christmas holidays. Even the Protectors were summoned home by anxious parents. Several teachers had left the castle to visit

distant relatives and family they had not seen but didn't want to miss while they still had the chance. If a motto existed for the wizarding world's current state of mind, it would be "just in case". "Let's put some money into a jar...just in case." "Let's visit your mother before the holidays...just in case." "Make sure to have your wand with you on the train ride home from school...just in case." "Never go anywhere alone...just in case." "Make out a will...just in case."

Headmaster Dumbledore ignored the list of things he had to do...just in case. He did not need to notify anyone about his final wishes, as they had been decided for almost twenty years...just in case. He gave a wry grin and stirred his tea after adding a twist of lemon. Fawkes preened in the corner and let out a few notes of song before settling himself for sleep. "Fawkes, my old friend, you wouldn't know where Harry is, would you?" Dumbledore asked his phoenix with a slight chuckle. The bird had never answered him and probably never would.

For the first time in a very long time, Albus Dumbledore felt old. One of his students, in fact, one of his favorite students, was missing from the safety of the magical world. He was left to the mercy of Muggle education, Muggle medical practices, and Muggle safety. In other words, he was in extreme danger with little to no recourse for help. What really frustrated Dumbledore more than anything else about the situation was that the boy seemed to want to stay there now.

Ronald Weasley had forwarded the letter Harry had written in response to Ron's own letter. The wording did not ease Dumbledore's mind or heart at all. It pained him to think that a student he considered one of his own felt unsafe at Hogwarts and found something in the Muggle world he preferred. Hogwarts was a one of a kind institution and Harry had found somewhere he liked better. It was almost shameful. Hogwarts had always been home to Harry Potter. The boy should be home with Dumbledore, not out in the Muggle world, dancing through who knew what kind of danger with no adult wizard to guide him!

Dumbledore rose from his chair and moved to his window to look down at the grounds. He saw numerous people portkeying to just

outside the Hogwarts' gates. He smiled to himself. The Order of the Phoenix was still growing, getting larger and more powerful by the day. New countries that he had not contacted were offering their services and support for the upcoming war...in exchange for meeting the Boy Who Lived.

He did not mind using the boy's name. After all, this would help Harry defeat Voldemort and give him many contacts for his later career, whatever he decided that would be. Harry could have his pick of professions at the end of this. Would the boy be interested in politics? Sports? Education? Law? Any one of the contacts Dumbledore had made for him would be able to further the boy's desires. His name would open the doors he needed to succeed in life. It would be easy to ensure Harry's comfort for the rest of his life once he fulfilled his destiny. Dumbledore knew then what a father felt when his children lived up to their full potential. Pride. He would burst with pride once Harry finished what he needed to and go onto his adult life.

Dumbledore left his office and changed his password as the gargoyle shut behind him, just to perturb the other teachers later on when they had to guess sweets. That was always so amusing to watch. He strolled down the hallway to the Great Hall, thinking about various matters on his mind, but chief in his thoughts was Voldemort's student.

William Zareh had finally managed to offer his services as a Dark Arts teacher to Voldemort and his student. Voldemort had been a little upset when Zareh had spoken out of turn, but seemed pleased that Zareh was willing to give up his free time to teach, especially when his profession was in education. A few of Dumbledore's theories had been confirmed. The boy was only fourteen years of age and had dirty blond hair and "piercing" blue eyes, to use Zareh's word for them. He did speak English, but it was heavily accented. Zareh couldn't quite place where the accent originated. He described it as a mix of French and some heavy tones common to Scandinavian languages. The student was also left handed and preferred spoken spells to silent. Voldemort had seemed amused when Zareh had asked about that tendency, but he hadn't enlightened his Death Eater to why he found the situation amusing.

The only thing of which Dumbledore was still uncertain was if the boy was doing it of his own free will (never mind that the lad was only fourteen...Voldemort could now add child endangerment to his already long list of charges) or if he had no choice. His spy had told him that Voldemort did lash the boy, but the boy acted like he accepted the lashes as though he was used to them and expected them. Dumbledore had already ordered Zareh to remove the boy from the situation if he had a chance to do so. Not that he had much of one. Voldemort would watch the lessons by popping in and out of the room, often speaking to the boy in Parseltongue. Zareh said that he could tell from the tones that Voldemort was either pleased or berating the boy. There was no medium in sight when it came to the lad's "education".

Dumbledore stepped into the Great Hall and took his place at the front of the room. The gathered members slowly died down in their greetings and turned to face him. "Members of the Order of the Phoenix." Dumbledore said calmly as he felt the various translation spells activate around the room. "We have a serious situation. So serious, in fact, that I do not know what to do." He listened for the expected chuckles and smiled to himself. Having an appreciative audience always helped his humor. "Voldemort," He paused while several members took the time to flinch at the name, "has a student." The entire hall erupted into chaos as many people reacted to the news. Many of the women started to tear up. The men just looked shocked. "He is still a boy. Our source puts him at fourteen, no older than fifteen." Dumbledore heard a sob from his right and saw Molly Weasley's face buried in her husband's shoulder. Well, the boy would have a mother if Zareh ever managed to get him away from Voldemort. "His accent is rather difficult to pin down. He does speak English, but with heavy tones of French and some Scandinavian influences. We are unsure of his original country."

"Mr. Dumbledore," a representative from France stood and waved for Dumbledore's attention. Dumbledore sent her a benevolent smile. "While this news is very distressing and disturbing, the French government is more concerned over the Boy Who Lived. We have not seen any evidence that Harry Potter is still alive and able to fight." She sat down with a smirk and Dumbledore waited for the applause to die before answering her.

“I saw Harry Potter myself not too long ago. The boy is healthy and looks very content where he is. He will be returning to Hogwarts shortly. Now, if we could return to the topic at hand?” Dumbledore waved his wand and an image appeared. “This is what our source says the boy looks like. Copies are being delivered to your seats now.” He watched as flashes announced the pictures’ arrival to each person. “Now, any questions?” Not about Harry Potter? Dumbledore hoped.

“I can’t believe we’re finally here!” Bug crowed as he jumped off the last step of the bus. “London!” He bounced in place while Harry left the bus. Sensei descended right behind and stood near, but not too close, to Harry while he scanned the area.

“Yes, Bug. We’re in London. It’s in England, not another planet.” Harry said calmly. He had actually fallen asleep on the bus and was only just becoming coherent. He adjusted his satchel and looked up at their hotel. It seemed to be a rather nice place. He moved to the side of the bus and waited for everyone to get off so they could check in and he could change out of the school uniforms.

“Grump.” Bug said without malice. “Someone get this spy some caffeine!” Bug announced to the whole group of students. A few who knew Harry snickered. He was becoming well-known as a caffeine addict.

“Everyone have your roommates?” Mr. Collins, a teacher Harry had only seen, asked as he waded through the excited teenagers.

“Yes!” Most of them shouted. Harry wondered why Bug had to shout in his ear.

“Alright. Into the hotel.” Mr. Collins led the way. Paul and Sensei were close to Harry and Rick danced alongside Harry and Bug, jabbering about all the junk food they were going to eat. “Now wait until I call you up.” Mr. Collins told the group. He brought out his clipboard like a shield and went up to the front desk.

Harry looked around and spotted all of the emergency exits...just in case. I'm becoming as paranoid as Moody. Searching for exits, carrying weapons, CONSTANT VIGILANCE! What am I turning into?

"James/Wells!" Mr. Collins called out. Bug left Harry's side and retrieved their key cards for their room. Bug handed one to Harry and slipped the other in a pocket. Rick snatched Harry's card away and winked. "Alright, gang! You have two hours to get settled in your room, changed for the theatre, and back downstairs. We are all meeting in the lobby, right back here, at five forty-five. Got that?"

"Yes!" The overexcited teenagers shouted. Harry ducked his head a little bit and pretended he wasn't with them. Okay, he was excited too. Over the moon, actually, but did they have to draw everyone's attention this way.

"Okay, go on. Get out of here!"

"Mr. Clipboard is way too energetic." Bug whispered to Harry.

"Nice name." Harry whispered back. Rick accompanied the pair up to their floor but stopped them at the end of the hallway.

"Sensei requested we wait here." Rick told them as he leaned against the wall. "It'll only be a few minutes." He promised.

"What's going on?" Bug asked as he dropped his bag.

"Remember when I told you my real name?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yeah...OH!" Bug's mind worked it out. Sensei passed Rick and took the offered key card.

"Guess what Sensei was before he became a teacher?" Harry told his friend as Bug looked down the hall after Paul. Bug turned around and looked at Harry.

"Really?" Bug asked. "Wicked."

“Yes. ‘Wicked’.” Paul said from beside the pair as he came down the hallway. “It is not to be announced to anyone. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.” Bug answered, turning solemn. “I don’t know anything.” He said with an innocent air.

“That much is obvious.” Harry said dryly. Bug cuffed Harry on the arm and glared at his friend. It was always so much fun to toy with Bug.

“Your aunt asked me to give this to you.” Paul said as he produced a small envelope. Harry accepted it with a look of thanks. He gave it a quick scan with his magic. Paranoid as Mad-Eye.

Harry,

Relax and enjoy yourself this weekend. Paul, Sensei, or Rick will be near you day and night, just in case the worst should happen. Have fun!

Love,

Aunt Petunia

Harry slipped the note into his pocket and realized that he was making quite a collection of notes from his aunt. He had kept every single one.

“You’re clear, 007.” Rick said as Sensei waved from Harry’s doorway. “Let’s get you into your room.” He herded the two boys down the hallway and into their room. Sensei was waiting for them. Rick disappeared, muttering something about pretty girls down in the lobby.

“These are call buttons.” Sensei told them as he held out two small pins. “The circle in the middle will call for one of us if you are in danger. You each get one and you will wear it at all times until we

return to the school. Only for emergencies.” Sensei said as he pinned one to Harry and Bug. “Understand?” He asked, looking quite fearsome.

“Yes, sir.” The boys said in unison.

“Good.” Sensei left the room and shut the door behind him. “Lock this!” Sensei said through the door. Harry flipped the bolt lock shut.

“Intense.” Bug said as he inspected the button.

“Yeah.” Harry said as he dropped onto his bed, his suitcase clattering to the floor beside him. “I’m actually getting used to it.” Harry admitted.

“Well, you never claimed to be normal.” Bug shrugged and told Harry he was getting into the shower. Harry waved him out of the room and opened his satchel. He dug out his journal and flipped over onto his stomach to write.

We finally made it to London. Bug is extremely excited...a little too excited. He’s in the shower now. I can’t help but feel that something is going to happen. I’m probably just being paranoid. I’m always being paranoid these days. I worry about what Dumbledore is doing, what Voldemort is thinking, my aunt...Oh god. Aunt Petunia will KILL me if she ever finds out what I’ve been doing with Voldemort. She will kill me and bury me under the flowers in the garden. Mi would send me to Siberia to have someone sit on me. Paul...would chuck me into the infirmary and strap me to a bed.

What was I thinking? I’ve become worse since deciding to do this. I sleep fine. I eat, well, a lot. I’m just completely paranoid. Mad Eye Moody type paranoid describes it.

“Gah!” Harry gasped as he felt something tighten around his wrist.

“Ah, good afternoon, lightening child!” Zen said as Harry saw him. You just saved me from having to bite you. What had you so distracted?”

“My journal.” Harry answered. “Zen, what are you doing here?”

Zen curled around Harry’s wrist and presented his head for scratching. He waited until Harry actually started scratching before answering. “Well, you were near my home this morning and I knew you were leaving. I thought you might be bored with all these...children.” Zen started in a gossipy tone Harry generally associated with the neighborhood grannies. “So, I just snuck out of my home and into your bag. It was very easy to do.” He confided. “Oh, right there! Perfect!”

“Uh-huh. You’re going to get me into trouble, you know.” Harry told him as he continued scratching Zen. It looked like Zen was getting ready for a new skin.

“No, I won’t. No one will see me.” Zen promised. “I’ll just stay in your bag and out of sight.”

“I HATE TIES!” Bug shouted from the bathroom.

“Here’s your chance to prove it.” Harry told him as he closed his journal and placed Zen on the bed. Zen dashed for Harry’s satchel and disappeared into the bag. “Bug, are you okay?”

The door slammed open to reveal a very frustrated Bug holding a tie in his hand. “Do you know how to do these stupid things?” he demanded.

“Yes. Come here.” Harry tied the tie as Bug started mumbling about burning the object in question. Harry snorted as Bug moved to the mirror to inspect Harry’s work.

“Practice much?” Bug asked in surprise.

“I’ve had a lot of practice lately. I’m starting to get good at it.” Harry shrugged and started for his shower. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“Sure. I have my button right here.” Bug said as he turned on the telly. Harry shook his head. Bug was mumbling something about Star Wars.

“I think he’s dead.” Harry heard Bug say in fascination.

“He’s not dead. He’s still breathing.” Rick said on his other side.

“Catatonic, then.” Bug said, slightly exasperated.

“Cata-what?” Rick asked.

“Buddy?” Paul said as he crouched down in front of Harry’s seat in the theater. “Are you still with us?”

“Paul?” Harry blinked and came back to himself. That had been amazing. Astonishing. Les Miserables was more than Harry expected. It was breath-taking and he wanted to do that!

“Yes?” Paul did not like the way Harry was acting. The symptoms were reminding him of shock.

“Does St. Jude’s have singing?” Harry asked.

“No, I’m afraid not.” Paul answered. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Harry answered. “I just discovered what I want to do with the rest of my life.” Harry announced.

“Did you?” Paul asked as he pulled Harry to his feet.

“Yeah.” Harry said with a smile. He shouldered his satchel and started following his group (Paul, Sensei, Rick, and Bug) down through the lobby. He smiled once they left the theatre. No more Auror job. No more professional Quidditch. No more Boy Who Lived. I’ve found my home. His hands flew to his forehead. “Get everyone back inside!” he ground out as he started to Occlude his mind.

“What?” Paul asked.

“He’s here.” Harry told Paul. “Voldemort.” A cold feeling started settling around him and he knew it was not his magic. “Everyone back inside!” Harry shouted. “Now!” Rick and bug reacted as one and started pushing the kids back towards the doors. Harry saw his breath and turned around. “Expecto Patronum!” he said out of instinct. Nothing happened. Oh for the love of... He shut his eyes and called up his magic.

Yes? Yes? What? It questioned with eagerness as it rushed through Harry. Harry requested that the magic defend against the dementors. He opened his eyes in time to see a bright silver flash. Sensei saw what looked like a firm silver sheet leave Harry’s body and coalesce into a stag shape. The stag lowered its body towards the Dementors and drove them back.

“Amazing, deshi.” Sensei said as he started to escort Harry back towards the theater. Harry was happy to go and leave it to the Aurors. Everything suddenly went sideways as numerous Apparition pops sounded everywhere. Aurors, Order members, and Death Eaters immediately started fighting each other. Sensei and Harry did what they did best among the flying spells and shouts. They started to fight through it.

Harry jerked as something grabbed him and hauled him backwards. His magic shouted at him as he slammed into someone. “Vampire.” Harry gasped out as his magic started gathering.

“Yes, Mr. Potter. Vampire.” The man said calmly as he bared his fangs and jerked Harry’s head to the side. He screamed in the next instant as a flash of sunlight hit his eyes. He dropped Harry and skulked away into a dark alley. Harry sat up and pushed himself to his feet. He looked up in time to see a Death Eater aim at Sensei. Harry’s magic lashed out at the Death Eater.

“Wicked.” Harry breathed. He fought his way back towards the theatre and noticed a group of Death Eaters, dementors, and vampires prepare to enter the theatre. He threw up a hand and the

entire group was tossed away from the doors. He set a shield on the doors that would stop anyone or anything harmful from entering. He looked to his left and saw Sensei fighting a vampire. Harry help up a hand and the vampire screamed from the sunlight.

Cold descended around Harry again. The dementors brought reinforcements. One of the dementors tossed Sensei further away from Harry. He watched in horror as his teacher arced through the air before coming to rest on his feet in a crouched position. An Auror rushed over to him. Sensei's okay now.

The dementors pressed closer to Harry. "You can't have me." He whispered as he Occluded his mind and his magic sent out a Patronus. The screaming inside Harry's head increased as more dementors joined the other ones. His magic flared and another Patronus appeared to join the other one. Two? I can cast two? A dementor grabbed Harry with his spindly fingers and started to lower its hood. Another flash of silver scared the dementor away. Two others joined it when another Patronus from Harry appeared, this time in the shape of a furious cat. It reminded him of Aunt Petunia, in a way. More dementors advanced on Harry. A memory of Aunt Petunia playing with his hair revealed another Patronus. It was a larger version of the cat. It didn't hiss. It roared.

The dementors screamed in pain. The sound went through Harry and made him wince. He watched as the battle died down around him, the Death Eaters retreating faster than they had appeared. Harry didn't feel anything about the wounded or dead. In fact, he couldn't feel anything at all. Did he still have hands? He raised one and found it trembling. He pressed it against his chest and fought the urge to scream. He couldn't feel it! His entire body was numb! The smell of the battle started to fade away. Harry looked around in confusion. Were all of his senses dying? He turned, trying to get back to the theatre, when he saw Sensei fighting with the Auror who had protected him. Harry trembled when he realized that he couldn't hear the shouting. Back to the hotel. Harry thought, waving a hand in Sensei's direction. His teacher disappeared from the wand-happy Auror.

Okay, you can't feel anything, smell anything, or hear anything. He looked up and saw Professor Snape standing a few feet away from him. He was saying something, but Harry couldn't hear him. He jerked as pain lanced through his entire body. You can feel again. Harry thought to himself as he stumbled towards the theatre. He couldn't even remember why he needed to go there. Pain came again and with it sound. Someone was screaming. Harry collapsed backwards as he realized that he was screaming. Snape and Dumbledore appeared above him as Harry's vision started to fade. The sounds of the city grew fainter as the music of birdsong replaced it. The buildings around him started to disappear, only to have lofty trees take their place. The pavement felt like grass underneath his body. He could hear Dumbledore calling his name and frantically casting healing spells.

Another figure came up on Harry's left side. Harry stared at him in disbelief. Why is he here? The man offered a hand to Harry. He lay there on the ground as he started at his "rescuer" and felt his body start to shake. The pain worsened and Harry screamed in defeat. He couldn't fight it any longer. The man took a step closer and knelt, still offering his hand. Harry's vision faded out a bit more as he rolled away from Snape and Dumbledore's hands. He grasped the offered hand just before he passed out.

"What was that?" Dumbledore asked Snape. Snape flicked his wand and swore.

"Potter's heart stopped."

Author's Note: Hi. I suppose hiding would be a good idea? I must find my passport.

Author's Note: Right, so you lot are not above Death Threats. Rather scary when you think about it, which makes me very happy that no one knows what I look like or what my real name is. Here's the next chapter. Enjoy!

[illegible]

“Tell me again what happened,” Madame Pomfrey asked as she waved her wand over Harry’s bed and frowned.

Snape sighed as he gathered his strength. He was tired of telling this story. "I didn't see much. Potter cast a few spells, mostly Patroni, and then he started screaming. It was hysterical screaming. Nothing like I have heard from the boy before. He fell over, screamed some more, and then turned away from us. It looked like he was reaching for something. His heart and breathing stopped completely. Dumbledore told me to return to Hogwarts with the boy. His heartbeat and breathing started again directly after arriving here." Snape explained to the waiting nurse.

Pomfrey gave him a skeptical look. "Heartbeats and breathing just don't start and stop without some reason." She stopped casting spells with a snort of disgust. "It does not explain where this odd shield came from." Pomfrey pocketed her wand and shook her head.

Snape looked at the bed and wondered where the shield originated. It had appeared after Pomfrey directed Snape to one of the private rooms. The opaque shield hid Potter from view and prevented any spells, potions, or medical treatments. The only thing Pomfrey could tell him was that the shield did not have Potter's magical signature. It wasn't Potter's fault, for once.

“What’s in his bag there?” Pomfrey asked Snape. The boy had somehow managed to keep a hold on the bag throughout the whole battle and Snape had no choice but to bring it along. Restarting his heart was far more important than worrying about moving a bag. Snape shrugged and flipped open the clasp, only to jump backwards in shock as a snack leapt out of the bag with its fangs bared.

He came back to consciousness slowly. It was painful as he once more became aware that his body and his nervous system were connected. He hurt everywhere and nowhere at once. He was tired and the fatigue went deep into his bones and through him. He had a sense of being displaced in the world, but had also found himself home at the same time. It didn't make sense at all and Harry avoided acknowledging it for as long as he could. The evasion of the issue did not last for long. Harry let out a low groan as his senses meshed with his body for the first time since he regained awareness.

"Back with reality, son?" Harry heard someone ask as he felt himself being lifted and cradled. A cup touched his lips. "This will help with the pain." The warm voice gently said as it shifted Harry into a better position for drinking. Harry opened his mouth slowly and drank some of the bitter liquid. He gagged at the taste but drank all that was offered. "Yes, it does have an unpleasant taste." The voice agreed. "Some juice." A different cup touched his lips and Harry drank that eagerly. It tasted familiar. Apple? Pear? Something like that.

The person holding him sat down on something soft and warm. Further layers were wrapped around them and Harry sighed in contentment. The pain was fading, he was warm, and he was safe. There could be nothing better. He allowed himself to doze for a while, wandering in his dreams about a career on the stage. He woke when he heard a strange noise that he knew he had heard before. He heard it again and his brain identified it. That was wood popping in the fire. There wasn't a fire here, was there? That couldn't be right. He was...um. He was at....er. Where was he?

Harry tried lifting his eyelids to see where he was, but the effort took a long time and it tired him out. His eyelids fluttered for a few minutes before he managed to open his eyes all of the way. He looked up and saw a familiar face. Who was that? Salt and pepper hair. Dark brown eyes. Kind smile. The little wrinkles by his eyes that Aunt Petunia called "crow's feet". He saw Harry's eyes open and started to pet Harry's hair. "Are you truly awake, little one?" Bley's asked in a soft voice.

“Yeah.” Harry frowned when he heard his voice. He shifted his head to look at one of his hands and resisted the urge to throw a tantrum to match his current physical age. He was small again. Really small. “How old am I?” He asked as he shifted to get a better look at the man holding him.

“Three.” Bleys said. “You’ve been here two weeks already.” Bleys explained. “Your magic did quite a bit of damage to you.” Bleys shifted Harry so he didn’t have to crane his neck up to look at Bleys.

“You took care of me as a baby?” Harry asked. That couldn’t be possible.

“Don’t worry. I won’t embarrass you by remembering.” Bleys promised. “No matter how adorable you were.” Harry felt himself blush and decided to ignore that particular comment. He had never been adorable.

“Bleys?” Harry hesitated to ask this question. He told himself he didn’t want to approach this subject. He didn’t need to know. “Did you really want to hurt me before?” The question came out before Harry could stop it. He burrowed deeper in the blankets as he looked up at Bleys. Perhaps ‘adorable’ would work in his favor here, never mind that he was still sixteen in his head.

“No, son.” Bleys answered with pain in his voice. “That was never my intent. The sole reason for doing that to you was so that you could learn that the Unforgiveables are nothing more than spells, blocked just as easily as other spells.” Bleys justified.

Harry studied Bleys for a few seconds before he yawned and his eyes close. “Okay.” Harry said tiredly. “Can we talk more later?” He asked as he curled up against his teacher and drifted off to sleep.

“Certainly, Harry.” Bleys answered as he looked down at his already sleeping charge. He would never admit that he spent that whole night just holding Harry and watching him sleep. He had his student back and he wasn’t going to let the boy go now.

Professor Bevington had a slight obsession with Victorian literature and had loved Dracula when he had read it as a teenager. Once he had found a stage version of Dracula, well, it just had to be performed, didn't it? Harry hadn't needed to try out again. Bevie told him that he knew Harry could act. Harry still had performed a monologue regardless of Bevie's feelings. Harry didn't want any students saying that he was favored over them or a teacher's pet. He wanted a part fair and square. He had had his eye on Renfield, but had needed to catch himself on the wall when he found out that he had the role of Dracula himself. Harry had confronted his teacher, wondering why he had the lead and why he couldn't have the role of Renfield.

“Why ‘Dracula’?” Harry insisted.

“That would be nice. I’ll try ‘Dracula’. See if he grows on me.” Harry thanked Bevie for his time and then went back to his room. It looked like he had the role. Now all he had to do was figure out vampires.

“Why are you still reading that book?” Bleys asked as he dished out breakfast. He motioned Harry over to the table. “Shouldn’t you have finished it by now?”

“It’s my lines for my next school play.” Harry said calmly.

“Play?” Bleys asked.

“Play-acting. I told you about this before. Remember?” Harry wondered how a man like Bleys could actually forget things. It was a bit frightening and made him wonder if he was going to start forgetting things. Alden came over to Harry and gave him a soulful look before jumping up on the couch and putting his head on Harry’s leg. Harry reached down and started petting him automatically.

“Ah, yes. I do recall you saying something about that before.” Bleys said as he pulled the cauldron away from the fire. “Come eat breakfast.” He told Harry. “We have quite a bit to do today.”

Harry pushed Alden off his lap and stood, dusting himself off automatically, just in case dog hair had found its way onto his clothing. “What are we doing today?” Harry asked as he pulled his bowl of hot cereal towards him and started adding anything he could to take away the bland taste.

“A little of this, a little of that.” Bleys answered cryptically. “Nothing too out of the way.” He assured the shrunken teenager.

“Are we still going running?” Harry asked eagerly. He didn’t know why, but the running did something for him.

“Yes, we are.” Bleys told him with an odd look. “Why do you enjoy it so much?” He asked Harry.

“I don’t know.” Harry admitted. “I mean, I did it with Sensei all the time. He had me run almost every morning before classes started, increasing the time and distance over and over.” Harry explained as he spooned cereal into his mouth. He took a muffin from the basket on the table and cut into it. “It made me feel better to run.”

“I had wondered how you held out so long.” Bleys said as he poured juice for Harry.

“What does that mean?” Harry asked as he looked up from buttering his muffin.

“I was amazed that you held out as long as you did with your magic.” Bleys explained to his student. “I had expected to see you again just a few weeks after you left me, but you lasted until after your new year. It was far longer than I thought it would be.” Bleys told him with a smirk. He returned his attention to his own cereal before continuing. “Running, or any physical exercise, is vital to us.” Bleys told Harry. “You are more than a wizard and, as such, cannot expect to get by with the same amount of effort. You must take very good care of yourself. Exercise is vital to continued good health, and good health is vital to control of your magic.” Bleys glanced at Harry and grimaced at Harry’s confused expression. “Please allow me to try again. Your body and physical condition are directly tied to your magic. The better physical condition you manage, the more readily your magic will respond to your desires overall.” Bleys looked at Harry. “Did you understand any of that?” He asked.

“Are you trying to say that working out will influence my magic?” Harry asked in concern. Bleys wasn’t making much sense.

“Yes, that’s it exactly. The better the shape you are in, the better your magic will respond. The stronger you are, the stronger the magic.” Bleys sighed in relief. “I’m so glad you understood that. I was unsure of how to explain it.” He admitted to Harry.

“That’s okay. I got it.” Harry sipped his juice and frowned for a moment. “That does mean my magic will continue to get stronger as I get stronger?” Harry asked in concern.

“To a point. You do have limits to your strength. Think of it this way. Your body can only gain strength up to a certain level. Your magic will grow to match that level. No further than that level and it will remain there so long as you maintain that level of strength.” Bleys looked at

Harry saw understanding there. "You are more than a wizard, Harry. The proper term for it 'magus' and very few people use that term, even from my time." Bley told Harry with a grin. "They liked to call me a sorcerer." Bley snorted the slightest bit and resumed eating.

"I'm a magus?" Harry asked.

"Magus, mage, sorcerer. They all mean the same thing to your wizards, but they are different." Bley explained to him. "The hierarchy is not difficult to understand. At the bottom is what you call 'Muggles', or non-magic folk. The term is a misnomer. All 'Muggles' have magic. They are just unable to access it, except for certain times." Bley gave Harry a sly look. "Any idea when that would be?" He asked his student.

Harry lowered his spoon and thought. When would Muggles be able to access hidden power? He remembered something he had read in a newspaper and smiled. "During times of great distress?" He answered, not entirely sure of himself but willing to try anyway. "Like lifting a heavy object off a child?" Harry had been impressed when he heard of a woman shorter than he was lifting a fallen tree off a little girl.

"Exactly right. Now, we have Muggles, regular animals, and Squibs at the bottom. They have magic but they cannot access it. The next step we have are the common variety of wizards and witches, along with creatures that can access and use their magic for their own desires. That would include your house elves, centaurs, trolls, dragons, goblins, and so on."

Harry stared at his teacher and then fell off his chair in laughter. Ordinary wizards and witches were grouped with house elves? Oh, he could hear the screaming of some of the purebloods from here! Umbridge would have to be readmitted to Saint Mungos. It was too good to be true! "If you are quite finished?" Bley asked after a few minutes.

“Sorry. I know a lot of people who would be extremely upset at that.” Harry said with a smile. “I can’t wait to enlighten them.” He gave an evil smirk as he resumed his seat.

“You have fun with that.” Bleys told him. “The next step is magician. These are people who are able to use a wand easily, but may sometimes find themselves able to utilize wandless magic, usually during a time of great stress.” Bleys nudged another muffin towards Harry. “Hmm. I think your friend Ron may be one of these. He has some power there.” He told Harry. The teen nodded. That did sound like his friend.

“The next step is sorcery. This step is filled with those who are able to create magic spells for use by others. They have more than power. They have power and instinct. They can almost feel magic, but not quite able to tell that they can feel it.” Bleys stopped at Harry’s look. “Well, ask your question.”

“Create magic spells? You can’t create them.” He told Bleys. “They just are.”

“They are and they are not. They do have to come from somewhere, so someone ‘created’ them. ‘Discovered’ would be a better term.” Bleys said patiently. “Most magic spells, the incantations and wand movements, were ‘discovered’ for those who could not call up enough power to work magic on their own. That is why Merlin is so popular. He created the use of a physical focus to allow magic to happen without the need for intense discipline. He allowed for wizards to appear.” Bleys said.

“So, without Merlin, wizards wouldn’t exist?” Harry asked, trying to understand everything.

“Yes and no. I don’t believe that time would not allow for the developments to happen without a certain person there. It would have just happened at a different time and through a different person.” Bleys explained.

“In other words, everyone can be replaced.” Harry said.

“Exactly.” Bleys said shortly. “Now, then. Where was I?” He asked rhetorically. “Oh, yes. Sorcerers. Your friend Hermione may be one of those. That Professor Snape, oh, certainly. He strikes me as a very strong sorcerer hiding behind the guise of ‘magician’ . Dumbledore, also.” Bleys appeared to muse for a few seconds. “I think that covers that.” He said as he refilled Harry’s bowl with cereal.

“The last step, the one you and I are on, is called ‘Magus’. We rely solely on instinct to use our magic. Magic is less like a tool and more like a partner in our lives.” He explained.

“Is that why it talks?” Harry asked.

“Yes. Like any good partner, magic knows us enough to be able to be heard. It can be quite entertaining when it wants to be, almost like a house elf with too much energy. That does not mean it’s a servant. You must take care of yourself. That will take care of your magic.” Bleys pressed the idea of heath once more.

“So, am I the only one of my time?” Harry asked. “There has to be more, right?”

“I’m afraid that there is only one other with the power to be called ‘magus’.” Bleys said slowly. “Unfortunately, I was unable to reach him in time and he carried out several rituals that reduced his ability to hear his magic.” Bleys gave Harry a significant look.

“You’re talking about Voldemort, aren’t you?” Harry asked with a resigned tone.

“Well, he did choose you as his equal.” Bleys told Harry with a tone of regret.

“So, is he responsible for me being a magus?” Harry asked as he buttered his second muffin.

“I think so.” Bleys told him. “Who are we to question the workings of Fate?” Bleys asked with a smile.

“Fate is...” Harry didn’t get to finish his sarcastic comment. Bleys cut him off with a look.

“There are forces in the world that not even I question, Harry. You’d do well to remember that.” Bleys said quietly but sternly.

“Right.” Harry was a little doubtful, but didn’t pursue the matter. Bleys could be odd from time to time. It looked like this was one of them. “So, that’s it then. What about other creatures? Things like werewolves?”

“They are not magic themselves. They are sick with a magical illness they can’t control. What’s the word you use? ‘Bug’?”

“Yes, but that’s a slang term. We usually use ‘disease’ for a continued illness.” Harry told him as he finished off his second bowl of cereal.

“Alright, well, it’s the disease that’s magic, not the person themselves.”

“What if someone is magic and gets the disease?” Harry asked.

“You’re thinking of your advisor, aren’t you?” Bleys asked.

“Yes, actually.” Harry told him.

“He can be helped, but not cured.” Bleys said calmly. “Just know that whatever you try may not work. You have no limits outside your physical self, but that does not mean that your advisor will be able to handle what will happen.” Bleys warned Harry.

“Okay.” Harry wasn’t sure if Remus would want to try to change anything about his lycanthropy. He figured that he could just ask. The worst Remus could say would be ‘no’.

“Crucio!” Bleys snapped. Harry dropped to the ground under the curse, grateful that Bleys had given him that split-second warning of a spoken incantation. He shut his eyes in concentration and he felt the spell start to diminish from the pain of his entire skeletal system breaking to nothing more than a slight evisceration. He jerked from the curse and felt it dissipate. “Very good!” Bleys praised Harry as the boy say up.

“Yeah, thanks.” Harry said dryly. “Is this really necessary?” He asked.

“Crucio!” Bleys said again. Guess it is. Harry held himself upright as he started the process again. He smiled when he noticed that the spell no longer held the same effects. It was becoming easier to determine where the line was between his own magic and that of the Cruciatus and Imperius curses. He and Bleys had been working on the Unforgivables for the past two weeks and Harry was learning a lot about what made magic essentially work in his body and surroundings. He ended the spell and looked up at Bleys with a smirk. “Crucio!” Harry closed his eyes again and separated his magic from that of the spell and opened his eyes a second later. “Well done, Harry.” Bleys said with pride in his eyes. He pulled Harry to his feet and wrapped the boy in a hug. Harry leaned into his teacher and sighed.

“It’s becoming much easier now.” Harry told his teacher.

“Good. It’s meant to be easy.” Bleys told him as he turned Harry back towards the cottage.

“Were you always this sadistic to your students?” Harry asked as he walked pressed against Bleys’s side. He didn’t like the idea of leaving. Here he was safe. No Voldemort. No Dumbledore. No wizarding world with their misplaced adulation, fawning at his feet. Here he was just Harry and found that he was able to enjoy the instinctual magic that was now second nature to him.

“Just the special ones.” Bleys answered him with an affectionate hand through Harry’s hair.

“Guess I’m really special.” Harry said with an innocent air.

“The most special.” Bleys continued the banter. Harry rolled his eyes. No wonder Bleys was so rough with him. “Do you understand the nature of the Unforgivable spells yet?”

Harry looked over at his teacher and bent his mind to the question. Harry was able to throw off any spell Bleys cared to hurl at him. He could ignore most of them as a matter of course. The first year spells he had learned at Hogwarts were nothing much for him to notice. Spells he learned in Defense classes (and out of Defense classes) took no more than a blink of the eye to vanish. The Unforgivables, well, Imperius and Cruciatus spells, were thrown off with just a few breaths and a moment of calm. Bleys swore that Harry would be able to disregard them the same way he did with first year spells by the end of his visit. "The Unforgivable spells are constructed the same as any other spell and can be treated magically the same as all other spells." Harry told his teacher.

"Excellent, Harry. You've learned a lot since you came back." Bleys said, pleased at Harry's answer.

"Thank you, Bleys." Harry said with a smile. "I've enjoyed learning it all."

"I do not have much more to teach you." Bleys admitted. "In fact, just a few days more practice will enable you to throw off those Unforgivable curses without a thought. That method will become automatic." Bleys said with a sad sort of smile.

"We still have two weeks. You can't have taught me everything I need to know." Harry argued. Bleys had how many years of magic to call on? There had to be something more he could teach Harry.

"Nothing of importance and nothing you won't learn by yourself in time." Bleys stopped Harry and sat on a log. He pulled Harry down beside him and wrapped an arm around Harry's shoulders. Harry leaned into the half-hug and smiled. He liked this. "Son, you have such knowledge of magic. More than knowledge. An instinct. Not everyone has that, not even I. Everything I have taught you came to me from my own teacher and my own studies, studies that took quite some time and a lot of effort. You need no such effort." Bleys told him as he looked over at Harry. "You are more of a magus than I can teach, Harry."

Voldemort's casting abilities and had mimicked them so Harry was fighting off 'the real thing', so to speak. In other words, Harry could now fight off Voldemort's favorite spells without a single flinch. The skill was useful to have. Harry would no longer need to tell Sensei that Voldemort had used certain spells on him. The spells would no longer affect Harry if he didn't want them to affect him.

"Yes, sir." Harry answered him. "I can't believe I won't be coming back here." Harry's statement was the truth. He couldn't understand that this was it. This was the last time he would take refuge in his own mind, that Bleys would not be a sentient being inside his head, waiting for Harry to seek out help. It was going to be strange, knowing that Bleys was not there anymore, that Harry was on his own.

"You act like we'll never see each other again." Bleys said as he stepped forward and rested his hands on Harry's upper arms. The boy had grown too tall to allow Bleys to rest his hands on Harry's shoulders anymore.

"Well, we aren't." Harry said, just a little confused. "Not really." Harry looked at Bleys's face and frowned. "What aren't you telling me?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"There is always a chance that we will see each other in the afterlife, Harry. You never know. Just hope." Bleys told the boy. "You've been an excellent student, son. It was an honor to teach you and watch you grow." Bleys said honestly as he squeezed Harry's arms.

"Thank you." Harry said as he stepped forward and wrapped his teacher in a hug. "For everything." He took a deep breath and tried not to sound like he was going to cry. This was going to be hard enough.

"There is no need to thank me." Bleys said calmly. "You learned what I had to teach. Nothing more." Bleys said as he stepped back from Harry and took the boy's hand. He led his student over to the couch. "You know that Dumbledore most likely removed you to Hogwarts." Bleys laid the fact before Harry.

“Yes, sir.” Harry answered. “I can’t imagine what else he would do with me.” Harry knew that Dumbledore would be ecstatic to have Harry back in the magical world, much less at Hogwarts. It would be an awkward situation.

“Make sure he doesn’t know the real you.” Bleys said as he gestured at Harry’s new “look”. “He would use you beyond your limits. You’ve reached what is known as a magical maturation. Everyone has them. You have no further steps to take in growing magically. Dumbledore may try to use you, or your abilities, before you’ve grown into them. Let him underestimate you. Let him think you a child. He will be hard-pressed to keep up with you once you reveal the levels of which you are capable.” Bleys counseled the boy sitting next to him.

“That’s a good idea. Hermione’s told me a few things...things I wish I hadn’t heard.” Harry allowed silence to fall as he looked around the cottage and then over at his teacher. “Thank you again, Bleys. I don’t think I could have done this without you.” Harry admitted.

“You couldn’t have.” Bleys agreed. “But you would have found a way.” Bleys stood again and sighed. “You must return now, Harry. There are people waiting for you.” Harry stood and looked down at his teacher.

“Yes, Master Bleys.” Harry said solemnly. “I do have people waiting for me.” He agreed. “I’m ready.” Bleys smiled at him and just crossed his arms. Harry closed his eyes and reached for his magic. He could do this on his own. He touched the power within him and felt something change and then a jolt. He jerked as he felt something beneath his back instead of something below his feet.

Harry opened his eyes and looked around. The shield surrounding him disappeared and he sat up. He recognized this place and wondered why he always managed to end up in Hospital Wing, even though he had not attended classes at Hogwarts this year. He was stiff as he fought his way to his feet and stretched. Stars twinkled outside the windows. Harry padded over to the closest window and looked out at the grounds of Hogwarts and the Forbidden Forest. He

could almost feel “Harry Potter” settle on him as the longer he stood there.

“You are awake!” A happy snake voice said. Harry looked down to find Zen looking up at him. “You are so different! And so powerful! This is wonderful! Think of all the fun we can have now! All the mice I can eat!” Harry smirked and bent down to pick up Zen.

“You are determined to become large and round, aren’t you?” He asked the snake.

“Oh, lightening child, your voice is so much deeper. Oh! You are no longer a child, but a man! Wonderful news! The others will appreciate hearing this!” Zen said as he wrapped around Harry’s wrist.

“Others?” Harry questioned sharply.

“The little green creatures that bring me a mouse.” Zen explained calmly. Oh, house elves. Nothing to worry about then.

“I’m going to take a shower and then get dressed.” Harry told the little snake he was holding. “You stay here. Did you cause any trouble while I was asleep?”

“I protected your bag.” Zen said proudly. “And I danced.” Harry looked down at the snake with a shuttered look. Dancing? Strange.

“Good for you.” Harry said as he moved his bag under the nightstand. He called up his magic and found a Hogwarts uniform appear on his bed. It looked a trifle small for him. Dumbledore would have chosen this, of course, not knowing Harry’s true size. He gathered up the uniform, told Zen to stay where he was, and entered the bathroom in his room. He stripped quickly and started his shower. He didn’t want to be vulnerable for any longer than necessary. He knew that he would be watched every minute he was here. He didn’t want to give Dumbledore any access to what Harry knew.

Harry climbed out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. He cleared the mirror and studied himself. He was taller and

more filled out. Bleys said that this was what he should have looked like all along, if it hadn't been for Vernon's plan of removing magic from Harry's body. He was well-toned, but not massive. His height nearly brushed six feet and his carriage made him look taller, as though he was studying everyone below him, not eye to eye. He looked stronger and faster. In other words, he now looked like the hero everyone thought him to be. He frowned and concentrated on his magic. The bones shrank, the muscles thinned, and the confidence faded just the slightest bit. There, he was now "Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived once more.

He pulled on the uniform and dug out his glasses from his bag. He nearly poked himself in the eye when he tried to remove his contacts. He hated when he forgot to take them out and he fell asleep with them. His eyes always felt horrible the next morning. He stowed his contacts away and tied the stupid tie. He didn't mind them, he really didn't, but why would anyone in their right minds give a bunch of hormonal children the perfect weapons with which to strangle each other?

Harry nearly jumped a mile when his door flew open. His wand (now an almost useless piece of wood) was in his hand and pointed at the intruder within the time it took his brain to register that the intruder was no one other than the school nurse herself. "Mr. Potter! What in the world are you doing out of bed?" She demanded as she bustled over to Harry. "That's right. Back into bed with you, young man!" She informed him as she pushed him back to the bed.

"I'm fine, Madame Pomfrey. Just a little confused as to how I got here." He admitted honestly. He would like to know the details of his arrival.

"Sit." Madame Pomfrey ordered. She startled the slightest bit when Zen slithered his way onto Harry's leg. Harry reached down and petted the snake with a smile. It wasn't every day that you could startle the nurse. "The headmaster had Professor Snape bring you back here." She told Harry as she started scanning him for any residual dark magic or injuries. "There was a magical shield around you and I couldn't do anything at all." She said tersely as she

motioned for him to stand. "There doesn't seem to be any ill effects, but I'm keeping you here for observation until tomorrow. I'm guessing you are hungry?" She asked.

"A little. Is my aunt here?" he asked.

"She has been notified." Pomfrey said as she finished her scans. "Just like every other time."

"I guess I have my answer." Harry said with a disparaging smile. Aunt Petunia would be here with the entire cavalry if she knew what happened. She must not know yet, or if she does know, she doesn't know where I am. He stayed on his bed as ordered when the nurse disappeared to order a tray of food for him. He didn't want to incur her wrath. Dumbledore he could deal with. Poppy Pomfrey...not so much.

He was halfway through with his tray when he noticed that the sun had risen and was just peeking over the top of the trees. He didn't feel the same now. He used to love watching the sun come up while at Hogwarts. Now, he wasn't so sure what he felt. Not the same and that was all he knew. He sipped the juice and grimaced at the taste. The pumpkin juice was a little too sweet this morning. He returned the cup to his tray and finished the cereal and fruit given to him. He was about to pull out his Mini-Messenger to talk to Hermione when he felt more than saw someone in the doorway. He looked up to see Headmaster Dumbledore standing there.

"Good morning, Harry." Dumbledore said as he stepped into the room. Harry sat up a bit straighter as Dumbledore came up to the bed.

"Headmaster." Harry returned, only with the slightest bit of respect in his voice. Dumbledore was not his favorite person right now and he didn't want the man to think he was forgiven.

"You gave us quite a fright, young man." Dumbledore said as he conjured an armchair next to Harry's bed. "It's good to see you, my boy." He reached into a pocket and offered a small tin towards Harry. "Cockroach Cluster, Harry?"

Some things never change. Harry thought to himself as he tightened his Occlumency shields. Dumbledore clearly wasn't above peeking into Harry's mind. "No, thank you." Harry said calmly. "Does my aunt know I'm here?" He asked shortly.

"She has been informed of your safety." Dumbledore said.

"She doesn't want me here." Harry told the headmaster tightly. He didn't want to remain at Hogwarts any longer than he had to stay there. He wasn't above threatening Dumbledore with his aunt in 'mother bear' mode. He deserved it.

"She does not have a say in it now." Dumbledore said affably. "Voldemort's latest attack has allowed me to step in as a magical guardian, Harry. You can stay here at Hogwarts year round now." Harry wondered if Dumbledore wanted him to be excited about this. "No more Dursleys. Isn't that wonderful?" Harry had to wonder when Dumbledore had lost the last of his lemon drops.

"Year round?" Harry asked. "I thought I had to return to Privet Drive each year?" Harry wasn't going down without a fight. He didn't want to be at Hogwarts and he was going to let Dumbledore know that.

"It's not that important." Dumbledore said. "You are home, you are safe, and that is all that matters." Dumbledore said as he stood up and banished his chair. "Madame Pomfrey will release you shortly. We both know you don't want to be in here any longer than necessary." Dumbledore twinkled and patted Harry's shoulder. "Your friends are on their way up to see you and they will direct you to your dorm."

"I know where Gryffindor tower is, Headmaster." Harry said in a short voice. "I want to go home." He told the man as Dumbledore started to open the door.

"My dear boy, you are home." Dumbledore told him as he left Harry's private room. Harry stared after Dumbledore. It looked like he was going to have to leave Hogwarts on his own. He stood and a phrase came back to him. What did "magical guardian" mean?

[illegible]

Author's Note: Look, no mean cliffhanger! That means no death threats! Yay! I'm off to celebrate my return to classes.

Author's Note: To everyone who pointed out my little "snack" problem: thank you. I have started a thread in my forum, easily found by clicking on my pen name, for such things. Thanks to everyone for taking the time to read and review.

Harry stared after the Headmaster in astonishment. Had the Headmaster gone insane, or was he serious? Bugger this. Harry pushed aside his breakfast tray and left the bed. "Zen, come on. We're leaving." Harry said as he lowered his arm for the snake.

"Yes, we're busting out!" Zen said as he wrapped around Harry's arm. "Woo-hoo!" Harry smiled at the snake's comments and packed up his bag. "Adios, wizards!" Zen laughed to himself as Harry paused just inside the door of the private room and called up his magic to make himself invisible.

He crept down the hallway towards freedom. He froze when he heard voices and nearly smacked himself for his idiocy. They couldn't see him! He stepped to one side of the hallway and waited. He nearly had to pick himself up off the floor when he saw Ron appear in the hallway. His friend was taller than he remembered him (big surprise there) and he looked very important in his crisp black robes. Harry knew that they were new robes; they did not have the appearance of having been through another Weasley male. A gold badge was pinned to Ron's right shoulder with an ornate "P" on it. Harry recognized the Protector badge when he saw it.

Harry had to do a double take when he saw the person next to Ron. Neville Longbottom had grown up to turn into a self-assured young man. He walked with more confidence than he had had before, and he certainly had less arrogance than Ron was displaying at the moment. Neville, too, wore the gold badge, but Harry knew he could trust Neville. He couldn't trust Ron.

He waited until they had made it around the corner and then he broke out into a run, silencing his footsteps as he ran. He knew that he wouldn't have much time now, not since Ron was going towards the infirmary. Ron would raise a hue and cry once he discovered Harry not where he was supposed to be and then Harry would have a harder time leaving Hogwarts. He had a feeling that everyone would be running around in a panic looking for him.

He jumped the last few steps that lead to the Entrance Hall and waited for the hall to empty. He thanked each lucky star he had as one little first year ran past him and headed towards the Transfiguration classroom. Harry lifted a hand and opened the door. He could practically taste his freedom!

Harry rushed down the stairs and cursed as he noticed that he was leaving footprints behind in the snow. He banished the footprints and cast a feather light charm on himself to avoid leaving tracks. He wondered if Aunt Petunia had a frozen pizza in the house. That would hit the spot. Frozen pizza and...not frozen pizza! Harry's stomach did a flip inside him and he felt himself go green. Okay, so no food. That was okay. Hot chocolate would be good. No, he didn't want that either.

Harry noticed he was slowing down as his nausea increased. Another five steps brought him to his knees and he retched. The cold from the snow seeped into his bones. He waited for the feeling to pass. It didn't. He forced himself to his feet and started forward again. He could go to bed once he got home. Aunt Petunia would have some medicine that would help until he got back to St. Jude's. Harry dropped to his knees again and fought back the dizziness now assaulting his head.

Harry pondered the reaction his body was having. Had he actually caught something? Was this a spell? He did a quick scan of himself for spells and found nothing on him, either active or inactive. Did he have a bug of some kind? He stopped to let himself rest and wondered how he was going to get home at this rate, when he couldn't even stand for long periods of time. Harry nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the main doors open up behind him.

Dumbledore stood in the doorway. He was scanning the ground in front of him. His eyes passed over Harry several times but he didn't react, so Harry guessed that Dumbledore hadn't seen him. Harry was grateful that he had learned invisibility as part of his magic and had no need for the invisibility cloak. Dumbledore would have spotted him had he used the cloak. "Check just inside the Forbidden Forest." Dumbledore said to a bunch of teenagers. "Look in the Quidditch

locker rooms, the Pitch itself, Hagrid's house. Check anywhere you think he might have gone. He isn't well, so he can't have got too far." Dumbledore motioned for the group to head outside. Harry noticed gold badges on their robes. The Protectors. "Search quickly, please." Dumbledore said as he went back into the castle.

Harry shuddered and held his breath so he wouldn't sneeze. Most of the Protectors had started towards the Forbidden Forest. There were only a few groups actually moving towards Harry. He pushed himself to his feet and decided that a short trip to the Hospital Wing would cure him of whatever he had, as well as protect him from Dumbledore a little while longer. Harry had a fair idea that not even the Headmaster could stand between Madame Pomfrey and a voluntary patient's well-being, especially one that felt as miserable as Harry.

Harry stole past the Protectors and back towards the castle. He had needed to do a quick side step to avoid one whirling around to yell about something she had found in the snow. A snitch? It didn't matter. He pushed his tired body up the stairs and into the castle. He leaned against the wall and caught his breath. He was more scared of having some self-important kid firing off spells at him than he was at the idea of Death Eaters teaching him. The Death Eaters knew what they were doing...for the most part. Most kids did not, especially when Harry knew that they had been trained by "shoot first, ask questions later" Moody.

He noticed that he felt better the longer he was in the castle. He felt completely normal by the time he reached the top of the stairs. No need for the Hospital Wing. Now what? Harry decided that he needed information. The whole 'magical guardian' thing was still on his mind. He needed to know what he was up against and how easy it would be to reverse the guardianship, as well as what having a 'magical guardian' meant. Time to pull a Granger. Harry turned his feet towards the library.

The library was amazingly empty. It was as though some higher power had arranged it, but he had a feeling that Dumbledore would not have made Harry's search any easier. It was difficult enough as it was. He couldn't find anything in the stacks about magical guardianship at all. It didn't lurk in books about traditions, law, or modern developments. It couldn't be found in books about ancient

rituals, social standings, or wizarding family. It did not exist, according to Hogwarts library. Harry had a suspicion that Dumbledore might have removed all of the books that mentioned magical guardianship, but he had no way to prove it. It was frustrating.

"I could kill him, Granger. Four hours searching, out in the snow, mind you, for his Golden Boy, and nothing! How does he know that Potter isn't hiding out in the castle somewhere?" Harry heard the overeducated tones of Draco Malfoy reach his ears.

"I told you, Draco. Dumbledore isn't like that. He would not have sent out the Protectors if Harry was still in the castle. The question is now, 'where is he'?" Hermione said as she approached her favorite table and dumped her satchel on it. "You shouldn't be so upset, Draco. You did use a warming charm."

"Oh, shut it, Granger. Warming charm or not, I was outside for FOUR HOURS." Draco snapped back at her. "And my name is Drake." He grumbled as he sat down across from her.

"So what is Dumbledore doing now?" She asked as she dug out her Potions book.

"He's asked Moody to take a stroll around the castle, just in case they missed somewhere." Draco answered. "He should have done that to begin with and saved time." Draco grunted as he found his own Potions book. "What did we have to do?" Draco asked as he flipped open the book.

"Chapter fourteen, for the thousandth time!" Hermione growled out. "Now let me study." She lowered her eyes to the book and ignored Draco. Harry felt a devilish smile go across his face. He stepped forward and tugged on a bit of Hermione's hair. She brushed back her hair and resumed her studying. Harry tugged again and watched as she looked around before returning to her reading. Harry tugged again and Hermione snapped. She whipped out her wand and had it pointed two millimeters from Draco's face. "So help me, Malfoy, I will hex you if you keep it up!" She threatened the boy across from her.

“What in the world are you talking about?” Draco demanded as he inched away from her wand.

“Stop pulling my hair.” She ordered as she put her wand away.

“You’re mental. I’m not pulling your hair.” Draco told her.

“Who is, then?” She questioned him.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s a ghost or something.” Draco offered lamely. Were all girls this mental?

“A ghost?” Hermione questioned dryly.

“Yes, a ghost. Or something. Look, it wasn’t me.” Draco said calmly. “Just ignore it. It’ll stop.”

“I can’t ignore it.” Hermione told him as she went back to reading. Draco wisely kept quiet. Harry reached out and pulled a strand again. “That’s it!” Hermione shrieked, nearly knocking over the table as she stood up. “Show yourself or I’ll have you exorcised in the most painful manner possible!” Her look promised certain afterlife death on anything remotely spectral.

“That depends,” Harry’s disembodied voice said. “on what you plan on doing with that wand, Mi.” Harry allowed himself to go visible. Hermione’s reaction was worth the possible threat to his life. Her jaw dropped and her wand fell from her boneless hand.

“Harry!” Hermione gasped out in shock.

“Did you miss me, Mi?” Harry asked. He fell over in the next instant when Hermione plowed into him and started sobbing into his chest.

“I was so worried about you, that attack on London, and then that mysterious coma, and now you’re here, of all places and...” Hermione broke down into tears and Harry realized that his re-introduction into Hermione’s school life could have been a bit gentler.

He wrapped his arms around her and held her. He could let his sister have a good cry. She needed it.

“It’s going to be okay, Mi.” Harry said as he reached up a hand and smoothed her hair back. It worked for him, so he guessed that it would work for her. “I’m okay, Mi. I promise. No more surprises if I can help it.” Harry promised.

Hermione pulled herself together and sat up, effectively squashing Harry’s stomach. “Mi, can’t breathe.” He told her.

“Good.” She said as she managed to gain her feet. “You deserve a thrashing for that little prank.” She told him as Harry stood up.

“What’s it to be, Mi? Hot oil or the rack?” Harry asked in a jesting tone.

“I don’t want to know what you lot get up to in Gryffindor Tower.” Draco said calmly from the table. Both Harry and Hermione blushed. Trust a Malfoy to make lewd comments. “Bloody hell, Potter.” Malfoy said in the next instant. “When did you learn invisibility charms?” He asked. “That’s NEWT level magic.”

“Allow Hermione to make up your study schedule. You’ll be years ahead.” Harry told Draco as he seated himself next to Hermione’s favorite spot. Hermione gave Harry a look that said ‘we’ll talk later’ before sitting down.

“What are you doing here, Harry?” Hermione asked in a quiet voice.

“Looking up something.” Harry admitted. “Or trying to, at the very least. There doesn’t seem to be any information on it.” Harry sighed and rubbed the spot between his eyes. “I’ve been here for nearly four hours.” He put his head down.

“And before that?” Draco demanded.

“Outside.” Harry said with a cheeky grin. “I walked past a whole bunch of kids several times before I decided I needed more

information.” He could practically feel the wheels in Draco’s head turning.

“And you couldn’t think to announce your presence?” Draco snarled.

“Why would I do that?” Harry asked with an innocent air.

Draco brandished a fist, which surprised Harry for more than one reason. Draco was a wizard and was unused to using anything other than magic. That, and Harry must have really ticked him off to have the blond boy threaten him so. The blond kept muttering “four hours, four bloody hours” under his breath as he made his way towards Harry.

“What were you looking up?” Hermione asked as she waved Draco back to his chair.

“ ‘Magical guardian’.” Harry said as he rubbed his eyes. He missed his contact lenses. He really did.

“Magical guardian?” Draco hissed as he practically leapt across the table at Harry. “Did you say ‘magical guardian’?”

“Yes?” Who was this, and why was he insane?

“Drake, what are you on about?” Hermione asked as she moved her books out of the way.

“Do either of you know what a magical guardian is?” Draco asked as he practically collapsed in his seat.

“No.” Harry said sharply. “I wouldn’t have spent the last four hours looking for it if I did. What do you know about it?” He asked.

“I can’t believe it’s not in the library.” Hermione said.

“It wouldn’t be.” Draco confirmed Harry’s earlier thoughts of it not existing in the stacks. “Magical guardianship is a very old, very

pureblood, very secret tradition. It's never been written down, ever." He informed them.

"So what does it mean?" Harry asked in frustration.

"Magical guardianship is usually done to protect someone, mostly from themselves." Draco explained.

"From themselves?" Hermione asked.

"Look, if you two won't stop interrupting me..." Draco waited until Harry and Hermione sent him sheepish looks. "Right. As I said, it's meant to protect someone from their own magic. The most common case, and most accepted, is one of where a child is magically powerful and the magic has grown faster than the kid. The most powerful adult in the building would then step forward and allow the child to be bound to his own magic. This action would theoretically protect the child from out of control magic and keep everyone safe."

"So, if what you're saying is true, then Dumbledore and I are bound?" Harry asked.

"It's Dumbledore, then?" Draco asked. "Yes, that's what it means, Potter." Draco confirmed.

"Let me get this straight." Hermione said as she held out her hands. "Dumbledore used this very old, very undocumented ritual, to bind Harry to him, to keep Harry safe from his own magic, is that right?"

"Yes, Granger. That's right." Draco said.

"Why?" she asked. "It doesn't make sense. Harry's magic is fine. It certainly isn't out of control." She puzzled through it. "There's got to be something we're missing. Something important." She chewed her bottom lip and stared off into space.

"There is." Draco answered. "You would have found out sooner if you had allowed me to continue speaking." Draco told her. "Magical

guardianship is one of control, a variation of the apprentice ritual.” Draco started. “Later, Hermione.” Hermione snapped her mouth closed. “The magical guardianship is used to keep the child, or in this case, Potter, close to Dumbledore. Potter here won’t be able to go far without Dumbledore’s presence or say so. If he does, well, the ritual will react and force the child back to safety.” Draco explained.

“So that’s what that was.” Harry mumbled to himself.

“Pardon?” Draco asked.

“I just felt sick outside. That’s why I came back to the castle.” Harry explained. “I’d be at home with Aunt Petunia, otherwise.” Harry admitted.

“Ah.” Draco did not comment.

“So, Harry can’t leave the castle?” Hermione asked.

“Harry won’t be able to leave any boundaries Dumbledore sets for him.” Draco explained. “If he goes too far, he’ll pass out and the adults will have a chance to return him to safety. You have to remember, this ritual was made for children who didn’t know any better. Wild magic is dangerous. This protected everyone, not just the child.”

“In other words, I’m on a tight leash.” Harry grumbled. He took a deep breath and sighed. Dumbledore: 1.

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione reached out and laid a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“I’m getting used to being the wizarding world’s puppet.” Harry smirked. He thought about his situation. “You said the most powerful wizard, right?”

“The most powerful wizard in the building, usually, but it’s supposed to be the most powerful wizard the child knows.” Draco elaborated. “It gives more chance for control.”

Harry paled and wondered if it was possible to pass out from shock. “Harry, are you okay?” Hermione asked.

“No.” He answered as he fought the urge to empty his stomach. “No, I’m not.” He took a deep breath and let it out as he fought the beginnings of a panic attack.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked.

“This can never leave the room, guys. It can’t.” He demanded fiercely.

“Harry, what is it?” Hermione asked patiently.

“Drake, would the ritual take over? If I encounter a more powerful wizard?” He asked.

“It should, yes.” Draco answered. “Magic will know and adjust accordingly. Why?” Draco’s expression turned bewildered as Harry groaned and lowered his head to the table.

“Who’s more powerful than Dumbledore?” Harry asked slowly. He heard Hermione gasp beside him.

“No one.” Draco said in a puzzled voice.

“Drake, don’t be stupid.” Harry said. “Dumbledore is not the most powerful wizard alive.”

“Harry, you can’t mean that.” Hermione said. “Please tell me that it’s not true.” Harry hated to reveal the truth to her.

“There’s a reason old Snake face is still alive, Mi.” Harry said calmly. “Dumbledore does not have enough power to defeat him. He’s not

strong enough.” Harry explained. “Dumbledore’s not the most powerful wizard I know.” He stated.

“You can’t mean the Dark Lord?” Draco asked.

“That’s exactly who I mean.” Harry snapped. “I’m not making up fairy tales over here, Drake. This is bad, very bad. Does Dumbledore have no brains? Did he think that I’ll never meet Voldemort from one moment to the next? He’s only thrown me at him at every opportunity!” Harry stood up and paced, his magic coming out the slightest bit. He didn’t notice his robes flaring as he paced, or the fact that his eyes had brightened. “How dare he do something so stupid!” Harry snarled to himself. “I’m not some pawn and this isn’t a chess game!” Harry slammed his hands down on the table and sighed. “It’s my life he’s toying with and I detest it.”

“It’s your destiny, Skywalker.” Hermione said nonchalantly. Harry couldn’t help himself. He broke out of his melancholy and started snickering.

“You are both mental.” Draco said seriously.

“Maybe, but that’s what makes it fun.” Harry answered as he resumed his seat. “Mi, could I snag some parchment?” He asked. Hermione handed him a few sheets of parchment, but Harry waved away the quill. He had a ballpoint. He would use that. Harry penned a quick two notes before turning in his chair. “Kreacher!” Harry hated calling for the house elf, but he had a feeling that the little creature was bored out of his mind caring for Remus. The man was so low maintenance.

“Master Harry has called for his Kreacher!” The house elf said in happiness. “Kreacher can do whatever his master needs!” Harry felt Hermione stir next to him, but ignored her. He could explain later.

“Kreacher, I’m sorry, but I need you to deliver two messages. I’m afraid that my owls would be intercepted by someone who wants to harm me.” It wasn’t much of a lie.

“Kreacher is happy to deliver messages!” The elf announced. “Nasty person who wants to harm Master cannot if Kreacher pretends to be an owl.” The elf mumbled more to himself than to anyone else.

“I knew I could count on you.” Harry said proudly. “This one needs to go to my aunt. Please try to keep from scaring her. You know she’s not accustomed to magical things.”

“Kreacher will be as quiet as a little mousie.” The elf said as he accepted one parchment square.

“I know you’ll do your best.” Harry praised. “This one is to go to Remus.” He said as he handed the other note to him. “Tell him I’ll be in touch, but that he is to follow the instructions in the note before anything else.”

“Yes, Master Harry! Kreacher is doing that.” Kreacher promised before he disappeared.

“Harry!” Hermione snapped.

“House elves’ mental stability is attached directly to their masters, Hermione. If Kreacher had been freed directly after Sirius’s death, he would have remained just as mad as Sirius.” Harry explained.

“Sirius wasn’t mad, Harry.” Hermione said in a disapproving voice.

“The master is mad if the house elf is mad.” Draco told her. “That would explain Dobby.” He muttered. “I’d always wondered about that.”

“Look, Hermione. Give Kreacher some time to stabilize and we’ll see about freeing him. I don’t think his little mind could do handle it right now.” Harry admitted. He worried about the little creature.

“Harry.” Harry looked up at the sound of the Headmaster’s voice. “You didn’t wait for Mr. Weasley in the Hospital Wing.” Dumbledore said with disappointment in his voice.

“Oh, you meant Ron?” Harry asked in confusion. “Hermione showed up right after you left...I thought you meant her.” Harry explained.

“No. I had sent Mr. Weasley to retrieve you.” Dumbledore explained.

“Oh. My mistake. Sorry about that. Hermione’s catching me up on all the work I missed.” He said, pointing to the books out on the table. “I’ve got a lot of work to do.” He said as he pulled Hermione’s Potions book towards him.

“Just make sure you tell someone where you are in the future.” Dumbledore said as he gave Harry a stern look.

“Of course, Headmaster.” Harry answered politely.

“I’ll see you at dinner, my boy.” Dumbledore said as he studied Harry for a second before leaving. Harry nodded and turned his attention to the book.

Hermione waited until Dumbledore disappeared down the hall before rounding on Harry. “What was that all about?” She blustered. “ ‘Of course, Headmaster’?” She mimicked. “You should have told him where to go and what to do while he was there!”

Harry looked up at Hermione and smirked. “So when this loose behavior I throw off/And pay the debt I never promised/By how much better than my word I am/By so much shall I falsify men’s hopes/And Like bright metal on a sullen ground/My reformation, glitt’ring o’er my fault/Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes/Than that which hath no foil to set it off./I’ll so offend to make a offense a skill/Redeeming time when men think least I will.”

“Harry, you’re a genius.” Hermione said happily as she turned back to her studying.

“I’m confused.” Draco said.

“That’s not hard to do to you.” Harry couldn’t understand why the Slytherin turned homicidal. It was so very easy to confuse a pureblood wizard with Muggle references!

Author's Note: Well, there you go. Next chapter will be...whenever I find the free time! Bye!

Author's Note: And moving right along!

Harry twitched his robe out of his way as he sat down between Hermione and Neville. He nodded to the boy and smiled at Hermione. It was his first day in classes here at Hogwarts, and his true friends, not the Protectors, had not allowed anyone to get closer to him than the people who surrounded him. The PPs took their jobs seriously, and instead of feeling suffocated, he felt protected from the rest of the world. It was comforting in a way, almost the same way he felt when Sensei and Rick had protected him.

It was strange, being back at Hogwarts. Nothing felt right. He felt out of place. Dinner had been odd the night before as the entire Gryffindor table and most of Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw had swarmed around him. He had backed up a bit and the PPs had surrounded him. The Protectors had gathered around, as well, until Mad-Eye Moody had shouted something nearly unintelligible at them, and they scattered back to their table. Harry sat down between Hermione and Ginny, ignoring Dumbledore's attempts to catch his eye. The food was ample, as always, but Harry really wished for spaghetti and meatballs with the accompanying breadsticks. He had no appetite at all. He forced several bites down and chased it with pumpkin juice, grimacing at the flavor. Had it always been this sweet, or had Harry just grown out of it? He had ignored the goblet of juice after that and drank water instead.

He avoided Dumbledore and disappeared along with Hermione and Ginny to Gryffindor tower. Some haggling with Dobby delivered his bed, which was missing from the dorm, along with some uniforms, pajamas, toiletries, and everything else he would need for a few days. Zen had claimed a spot in Harry's bed to stay warm and had talked to Harry until he had fallen asleep.

Harry had woken early and spent an hour in the Room of Requirement stretching and running before going back to Gryffindor tower to plan his strategy of "how avoid Dumbledore" for the day. He had narrowly escaped being discovered by a group of actual Protectors wearing strange outfits like one Harry had found included among his provided things. Harry was not going to give Dumbledore the satisfaction of shoving Harry into any lessons he didn't want.

There was no way Harry was going to be a Protector. No way.

Harry broke out of his thoughts as the door opened, and Professor Zareh entered the room. Harry had reserved judgment about this professor until he saw the man in action. His record with Defense teachers had not been the best, and, except for Sensei, all of them had tried to harm Harry, either willingly or unwillingly. He couldn't, however, blame Remus for his actions in third year.

"Good morning, class." Professor Zareh set his books on the desk and looked about the room. "We are going to have a guest speaker today, but I'm afraid that he has not arrived yet." Zareh told them. "Is everyone here?" He asked.

"Yes, sir." The class chanted as one.

"Even Harry Potter!" Ron's voice rang out from the back of the room, where he was sitting with several Protectors. Harry had steered clear of Ron so far, putting off the inevitable confrontation. He knew Ron was a little brainwashed by all of that Protector nonsense, having heard first hand accounts from Ginny about how "important" Ron was now, especially since he was the "Boy Who Lived Expert". Harry turned his attention back towards the professor to see his reaction.

Professor Zareh arched an eyebrow and nodded. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Weasley. I am well aware that I have a new student today. Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Potter." He said as he turned to Harry. "I'm interested to see which of the stories about your defense skills are true," he told the boy.

"I'm sure you have access to my file, sir." Harry answered. "Don't trust anything Professor Umbridge said, and you'll be fine." Harry told him with a shrug.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter." Zareh nodded and turned to the class. "Class, I do believe that our guest speaker has arrived." The entire class looked around, obviously searching for their guest speaker. Harry looked up and was shocked to see a man sitting on one of the

rafters directly above him. The man smirked at Harry and held out a hand as though to say 'this is a defense class?' Harry smiled. He liked the man already, whoever he was.

"Professor, there is no one here!" Seamus Finnegan called out from his seat. Harry cringed. Had they learned nothing at all? One should always look up! Harry watched as the man shook with silent laughter, and Harry's smile widened. Was he the only one who could see this visitor?

"Are you sure about that, Mr. Finnegan?" Professor Zareh asked, one of his eyes twitching at the corner. Harry knew that this Professor was well aware of the location of his guest speaker, and that he was greatly amused as well.

"Yes, Professor." Seamus answered.

"I suggest you all keep looking." Zareh said, amused by his students to no end. Did none of them know when to look up? His eyes scanned his class, and he noticed Harry Potter staring at the man in the rafters with amusement written on his features. Well, well. Five points to Gryffindor.

"Come now, William!" The man's voice rang out in the classroom. "The children cannot possibly be this bad!" He stood from his seat and crouched on the rafter. "You only have one who could find me!" He pointed down to Harry. The entire class shifted their eyes up and stared.

"Alright, Khalid, you've had your fun. Get down here and introduce yourself properly before my students run away." Zareh was surprised to hear the Potter boy snort, as though entertained by the thought of students running away.

"You ruin my fun, William." The man jumped from the rafter and landed directly behind Harry. Harry twisted on the bench and looked at the man. He was surprised to find that the man had green eyes and black hair like him, but nothing like his own. He was pale beneath his olive skin and a smile played about his lips as though he knew

why Harry was amused and found his own amusement in Harry's mirth. "There is always hope, I suppose." The strange man identified as Khalid said as he moved towards the front of the room and away from Harry.

"Class, this is my good friend, Khalid Haven, to be addressed as Mr. Haven unless he tells you otherwise." Zareh paused for his friend's snort. "Five points to anyone who can tell me why Mr. Haven is here today." Zareh said with a smile. No one in his class moved. "Someone must know." He moved his eyes to Hermione, who only shrugged with a wide-eyed look. "Anyone?"

"And hope is crushed underfoot." Haven muttered under his breath. Zareh shot him a glare. "I think, William that one of your students knows." He said, pointing to Harry with a finger.

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" Zareh hoped that at least one student could tell him.

"I am not sure, sir, but are we going to learn about vampires today?" Harry said, having an odd feeling that he was right. There had been something...off about Khalid Haven.

"Five points to Gryffindor!" Zareh said with a smile. He could continue to hold to his thought that his students were smarter than they displayed during class. "What tipped you off?"

"Er, I'm not sure." Harry hedged. He knew what tipped him off, but he wasn't about to announce to the class that his wandless magic had flared around him in protective waves due to the vampire's appearance. "He was not in the room when we entered, but he managed to appear silently during the first few minutes." Harry stopped and tried to come up with another reason. "He felt cold when he was standing behind me, and I know of only two creatures that do something like that. I do not feel the need for chocolate and he's not sucking out my soul, so I think it is safe to say he's not a dementor." The class had many DA members in it, and they all let out a chuckle at Harry's statement. His reaction to dementors was well known

among them, and he often joked about it to take away focus from his infirmity. Laughter was the best medicine in the strangest ways.

Harry tilted his head to the side as the vampire rattled off something in a language that he did not recognize. He was even more surprised to hear Zareh answer in that language. Interesting. More importantly, could they teach him that language? It was beautiful, and it called to him in the same way that Bley's original language did.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. You are quite right. Khalid is indeed a vampire, and two of the traits are silent movement and a feeling of cold when a person is near to them. Can anyone else tell me something else that will identify a vampire? Yes, Miss Bones?"

"Vampires are unable to be in direct sun." She said, and then frowned. "He is, though, so he can't be a real vampire." She said with a sigh.

Zareh turned to Khalid and raised an eyebrow for an explanation. The vampire smiled and bared his fangs. "Wonderful invention, sun block. It enables me to feel the sun for about fifteen minutes or so." He shrugged as though to say "what can you do?"

"I assure you, Miss Bones, that Mr. Haven is indeed a real vampire." Zareh told her with a smile for his friend. "Anything else?"

Harry allowed himself to fall into his familiar pattern in taking notes, upset that he had already read this chapter in his text (never allow Hermione Granger to send you homework assignments; you would be ahead by at least a week). He scratched down the latest fact about vampires (fangs) and had to smile to himself. Bug would put his thoughts very articulately: "duh!" His quill slowed, and he felt eyes on him. He blinked and looked up to find the vampire looking at him.

It wasn't a creepy kind of look. No where near the level at which Harry felt creeped out. No, this was different. Khalid Haven's head was tilted just a bit to his left as though he heard something the rest of the room did not, and he carried a smile just about the corners of his lips. Those lips twitched as he discovered Harry looking back at

him. The two locked eyes for a moment, and Khalid's smile grew wider before he blinked and looked at the next interrogator.

Harry studied his notes and decided that the vampire meant no harm at his point, or, if he did, he would wait to attack later. Harry heard laughter inside his head as he finished that thought. How can I attack one who has already died? Harry dropped his quill, cursed under his breath at the mess, and pulled out his wand to get rid of it. What was that?

Another gift. Harmless, I assure you. Harry stopped and stared at the vampire. You are very observant.

Harry decided to ignore the voice in his head. After all, hearing voices, even in the wizarding world, was never a good sign. He heard laughter in his head. Looks, brains, and a sense of humor! Harry was not crazy. He was not! Not crazy, no. Why did these things happen to him? These things happen to you because you are so special, lightning child. Why does everyone keep calling me that? We call you that because it is who you are.

Harry had enough of the voice and threw up his Occlumency shields to the third level. The voice seemed to pout at being denied access but left him alone. Harry maintained his shields throughout the rest of the lesson and ignored everyone around him in favor of going over his Dracula lines in his head. He had only mastered the first part or so, but he wanted to be ready when he returned to St. Jude's. The rehearsals were not set to start for another two months, but he wanted to be ready to start when he returned.

"Alright, class. I want a roll of parchment on what you learned today, as well as a list of questions, anonymous questions, mind you, of what you were too afraid to ask today." Harry gathered up his parchment and quills (he would never like quills again after having gel pens) from his desk and placed them in his book bag next to his journal. He smiled at Hermione's enthusiasm over the assignment and started following her out. "Mr. Potter, please stay behind." Harry froze as Hermione stopped at the door. Stay behind? "You've done nothing wrong. Do not worry." Hermione looked at Harry, gauging what the danger level was.

“You can go ahead, Hermione. I’ll meet you at the next class or back at the Tower. Whichever comes first.” He said with a shrug. Hermione nodded and put her hand in her bag as she left. Harry knew what that meant. Help was only a scratch away in the Mini Messenger. She would be camped down the hallway.

“I am very impressed with your performance today, Mr. Potter.” Zareh told Harry.

“Thank you, sir.” Harry said, shuffling his feet. “I had a lot of time to read.” He said as a means of explaining his knowledge.

“Hmm, yes.” The vampire said with a smile. “That does not explain a few things I find curious.” Khalid said with a smile. “Your Occlumency shields, for instance.” It was a sign of how surprised Zareh was that he dropped his wand. “Or your impressive control. The scent of death just beneath the surface.” The vampire said as he practically hugged Harry. “It’s intoxicating.” He said as he breathed deeply, obviously tasting Harry’s scent.

Harry jumped as he felt a warm snake body start wrapping around his wrist. He stared down at Zen. “Back off, bloodsucker! This is my human! Mine, mine, MINE!” Zen challenged the vampire with a hiss. The vampire looked down at the tiny snake in delight and crooned at it. Harry rolled his eyes as Zen kept up the verbal abuse towards Khalid and pulled Zen from his wrist to put him back into the specially warmed pocket of his satchel. “I’m the Champion!” Zen hissed from his home.

“I’m sure you’ll forgive me if I don’t thank you for that as a compliment.” Harry said as he backed away a pace. He hated being close to others! Loathed it. The vampire’s lips twitched as he took two large steps back from Harry and gave the boy a smile.

“Occlumency?” Zareh gasped out. “You know Occlumency?”

“Yes, sir.” Harry answered. He tapped his forehead. “It’s a useful tool when the Dark Lord has a link to your head.” Harry said with a rueful smile.

“So, you’re the one I was supposed to teach!” Zareh said as though he just made the connection. He jerked for a second before turning to look at the vampire. “Really?” He asked his friend, almost curious. “Odd.”

“What’s odd?” Harry could not resist asking. He knew that life was too good to be true, and he would be normal.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Potter. Khalid was just telling me that your shields are strong enough to lock him out of your thoughts.” Zareh explained to Harry.

“So I’m not going crazy.” Harry said. “Good.”

The vampire found this amusing and threw his head back to laugh. Harry chuckled a little bit as he realized that the man was really amused and the laughter was not mocking. “Oh, no, Harry Potter. You are not crazy, no crazier than I.”

“Should I be worried, sir?” Harry asked his teacher. This question led to more laughter from both men.

“Oh, William. You never told me that your students could be so entertaining.” Khalid said with a lot of mirth still present in his voice.

“This is the first time I have had the privilege of meeting Mr. Potter. He was away at another school until recently.” He explained to his friend. “I would love to continue this over lunch in my office, Mr. Potter, if you have time right now.” Harry knew that he was free until two o’clock that afternoon. Dumbledore did suggest that Harry get to know the defense teacher. Harry knew that his headmaster felt that a love for the subject would lead to a bonding moment for the two of them, as Remus had told him some time ago. Harry was also curious about this vampire who seemed to become more cheerful each

second Harry stood there deliberating over the idea of lunch with a teacher and a vampire.

“He shall have to tell his little friend in the hallway that he will be here for quite some time.” Khalid said with a smirk. Harry gave a sheepish smile and nodded.

“I’d be glad to stay, sir. I’ll just go and tell my, um, friend that I’m staying.” Harry put his satchel on a nearby desk and went to the door. He poked his head out. Hermione dashed down the hall and looked him over.

“You’re still alive.” She said calmly. “Good.” She said it so matter of a fact that Harry had to laugh. “What’s going on?” She asked him.

“Professor Zareh has invited me to lunch.” Harry told her. Hermione’s eyes went wide as she studied Harry. “Don’t worry. No spells have been cast.” He promised her. “I’ll see you in Transfiguration, alright?” He asked her.

“I’ll meet you here. We can walk together.” She told him. She gave him a quick hug around his neck and then disappeared.

“Your friend loves you.” Khalid said from directly behind him. Harry turned and found himself nose to nose with the vampire.

“You enjoy sneaking up on mortals, don’t you?” Harry asked as he inched along the wall and took a few steps away from the vampire.

“The sense of their panic is always comical.” Khalid said with a smirk. He tongued one of his fangs and offered Harry a smile. “You, of course, are not panicked at the sight of a vampire. Just the idea of someone that close to you.” Khalid winced as Harry’s Occlumency shields locked down firmly on Harry’s thoughts. “No need for that.” Khalid said as he rubbed the spot between his eyebrows. “That conclusion was from observances only, and not by digging through your mind.” Khalid relaxed as Harry relaxed his own shields. “Thank you, Mr. Potter.”

“I’ve missed something.” Professor Zareh said from his desk where he was closing his case. “No matter. Lunch, gentlemen?” He opened the door to his office and gestured for Harry and Khalid to enter. Harry allowed the vampire to go first, but the professor refused to enter. Harry followed the vampire and his magic tightened around him. No one and nothing could harm him now. At least, not through magical means. Physical means, well, Harry would have a few seconds warning. Khalid shot him an amused look and languorously settled in an armchair in front of the fireplace.

“Sit where you like, Mr. Potter.” Professor Zareh said with a wave. “Make yourself at home.” Harry nodded and looked around for a chair.

“What my dear friend means, is: ‘Relax. No one here is going to try to kill you.’” The vampire said from his chair. He waved his hand and a goblet appeared at his elbow.

“Er, yes.” Zareh said, looking a little uncomfortable. “Did you really think that, Mr. Potter?” Zareh said as he took his own chair. “Did you think that I meant to harm you?”

“I’ve not had the best track record here at Hogwarts. My third year is the only year where the Defense teacher did not consciously try to harm me in some way.” Harry told him. “I have learned to be cautious.”

“Paranoid.” The vampire commented.

“That, too.” Harry agreed. “It’s saved my life.” Harry looked from one to the other and sighed. This was an uncomfortable situation. He did not know these people and in fact could not pin down a reason as to why he had agreed to it in the first place. “Perhaps this was a bad idea.” He said as he shouldered his bag. “Thank you for the invitation, sir, but perhaps another time?” Harry moved to the door and opened it. He vaguely heard Zareh calling him back but increased his pace until he was safely in the hallway. He leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long he could keep up a front. Okay, it was starting to get to him. Dumbledore cornered him at different times during the day to ‘check in with him’. Harry knew that

the other professors, especially McGonagall and Zareh, had been asked to watch him. He wasn't allowed outside at all, even on the stairs. He would feel sick if he tried to leave the castle. The further the distance, the worse he became. He even started losing his vision at one point. He had crawled back to the school and trembled in a dusty corner for a few minutes before regaining his ability to stand. Dumbledore had missed him there and for good reason. Harry loved invisibility charms.

His eating had declined. It was a trial now, to sit at the Protectors' table (Dumbledore had ordered him to sit there at every meal without fail) and pretend to be cheerful and interested in the exploits of Aurors from the past. He listened with half an ear as he recited Dracula lines in his head. Water did not seem to exist at the table of the Protectors. They wanted pumpkin juice and butterbeer at every meal and the headmaster indulged them. His only consolation was the fact that Neville was at the Protectors' table. Harry claimed him as eating buddy from his first meal and fought to sit next to him, easily ignoring the person on his other side.

Sleeping wasn't so great, either. The bed felt like it was smothering him with its many hangings and pillows. He had trouble finding a comfortable spot and then staying asleep once he reached that state. A shift from one of his roommates woke him. He knew that there was no real reason to be paranoid while sleeping, but he'd had more than one dream about Dumbledore doing something to him while he was asleep. He didn't trust the dormitory to be safe, even with concrete proof of Dumbledore not being there. It never hurt anyone to be cautious. Add his worry about Voldemort calling him for a lesson, and his sleeping patterns were completely out of his control. He could snatch odd moments of sleep while he was in the library with Hermione and Drake or during free periods, but it was not equal to the amount he lost every night.

Harry had also found himself joining the others in their morning workouts...at Dumbledore's insistence, of course. It was ludicrously easy compared to a Sensei workout. A few spell castings, a few laps around the room, and ending with a history or strategy lesson. He hesitated to figure out his exact feelings about the lessons, but the word 'pathetic' hovered on his lips when asked what he thought of

them. DA had been a little harder than these lessons. These were to protect the entire school? Neville agreed with him, but “Dumbledore himself planned the lessons with Moody” and nothing else could be said about them.

Sensei would kill him. He knew Sensei would like nothing more than to close his hands around Harry’s throat and choke the life out of him for not taking care of himself like he should. Harry couldn’t help it. He couldn’t help that he had no appetite that potions couldn’t help, or that he was too scared to get a full night’s sleep. Yes, he was scared. Absolutely terrified. He just wanted to go home or back to St. Jude’s. It wasn’t possible. He had cornered Draco in the hallway and demanded every last bit of information about the magical guardianship. Drake told him everything again and Harry found out one thing that greatly disturbed him.

He had no real rights. The ritual would take over no matter how he fought it. He couldn’t break it. He couldn’t change it, even with his own magic. The ritual would last until he was of age or taken over by some outside force. As long as he was the ‘child’ in the ritual, he would be unable to do anything. The ritual was done to protect both him and his magic. His body would shut down if he used too much. He’d just pass out and Dumbledore would be the one to wake him up. He wouldn’t be able to wake up without Dumbledore’s magic. Albus Dumbledore had complete control of him and his magic. It wasn’t fair.

Remus had spoken with Harry’s lawyers about the ritual and sent a message to Harry via the Mini-Messengers. The news was not as Harry had hoped. They actually managed to agree on something: the ritual was completely binding, whether Harry’s magic was out of control or not. Both lawyers had lodged complaints with the Minister of Magic on Harry’s behalf, but Fudge was unwilling to listen. Dumbledore had told him that Harry’s magic had caused Harry’s heart to stop and that was all the excuse Fudge had needed to allow Dumbledore take complete control. Okay, so they had evidence, but that didn’t mean they had the right!

Harry tossed his gold “Protector” pin into his borrowed trunk and sneered to himself. If he had one more first year walk up to him and ask how he was going to defeat Voldemort... “Harry, my boy.”

Dumbledore's voice said a moment after Harry's magic warned him. "Are you busy?"

"I have a bit of homework..." Harry said slowly.

"Never mind that. I'll let the professors know you were with me." Dumbledore said, motioning Harry closer to him. "Where is your badge?" Dumbledore asked in a worried voice.

"It's in my trunk." Harry said. What are you playing at, Headmaster? Harry thought to himself

"Get it on, dear boy. You must always remember to wear it." Harry returned to the trunk and retrieved the badge, attaching it to the front of his robes, feeling a little heavier with its weight. "Come along, Harry. We have much to do." Dumbledore said as he led Harry from the Protectors' dorm.

"What are we doing, sir?" Harry asked as he loosened his tie.

"Just a small meeting." Dumbledore answered absently. Oh, it must be that meeting with the professors he mentioned yesterday. Harry followed him, wondering when he could go to bed. He was exhausted. He frowned when he realized that they were outside the Great Hall. This isn't right. "Okay, Harry?" Dumbledore said as he turned towards Harry. He reached out and fixed Harry's tie. "Just stay close to me and you'll be fine, my boy." Dumbledore's wand removed non-existent wrinkles from Harry's robes and Dumbledore smiled at Harry.

"Yes, sir." Harry wasn't exactly sure what was going to happen. What kind of meeting was this going to be? Dumbledore flicked his wand towards the doors and they opened.

Harry nearly bolted. The Great Hall was filled with far too many people for Harry's comfort. "Go on, Harry." Dumbledore said, nudging him in the shoulder. Harry took a deep breath and tried to talk himself into thinking this was nothing more than a performance. He drew himself up and felt himself shift into Edmund. He strode forward and saw Dumbledore motion towards the head table. Harry nodded and

started that way, only to be stopped by a hand on his shoulder. "Harry, let me introduce you to the Minister of France, Laurent Devereaux. Minister, this is Harry Potter."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Potter." The minister said as he extended his hand. Harry nodded and shook the minister's hand.

"Likewise, Minister." Harry said before Dumbledore ushered him along what appeared to be a receiving line. You have got to be pulling my leg. I'm being bandied about like some sort of celebrity. Er...never mind. Harry met far too many people to keep them straight. Note to self: Get tape recorder when learning peoples' names. What followed was an almost twenty minute ordeal of being introduced to various 'important people'. He ignored his ire at Dumbledore and acted like a gentleman, but he wanted nothing more than to run out of the Great Hall and leave Hogwarts altogether. The introductions finally ended when they reached the head table, but Dumbledore did promise more later. Oh, joy.

"Thank you, everyone, for coming on such short notice. As many of you can see, Harry has finally come home." Scattered applause flew around the hall. Yeah, I was kidnapped and am now being held against my will. "Don't worry if you haven't met him yet. There will be plenty of time after the meeting." Dumbledore motioned for Moody to step forward, where the paranoid Auror began a presentation of what they knew about Voldemort's latest activities. Harry had to practice a calming exercise to keep from laughing. Their information was horribly out of date. Harry glanced over at Zareh and wondered what the man was telling the Order to have such horrible information. Even Harry was better informed than this lot...of course, that could be due to Voldemort's belief that Harry was slowly turning dark.

"I see that grin." Harry heard Remus whisper behind him.

Harry turned and smiled at Remus. "Hello, Remus." He whispered back.

"We'll talk after." Remus told him as he sat back in his chair. Harry nodded and returned his attention to the Bulgarian Minister, who had

a fascinating report about Dark Magic in general. Someone save me. This feels like story circle from primary.

Harry zoned out during the lecture and recited his lines for Dracula in his head. "Ah, listen to them...children of the night...what music they make!" Harry could not understand why Dracula liked or did half the things he did. He wasn't 'becoming' Dracula like he had with Edmund. "I never drink...wine." Yes, but why? Why did Dracula phrase things that way? Harry frowned. He couldn't understand his part. He hated to admit it, but he needed Bevie.

"Harry, my boy?" Dumbledore said in a quiet voice. "Are you well?"

"Yes, Headmaster. Just tired." Harry told him with a small smile. Grin and ignore it, Harry. Just grin and ignore it. You'll get out of here...eventually. Harry didn't have a chance to talk to Remus after the meeting, or anyone else he knew. He was led and pushed from one group to another without a chance for protest. They were all oh so pleased to meet him. He wanted to vomit. They were pleased to meet the Boy Who Lived. No one could care a bit about 'Harry'. One more offer, just one more offer of a job of Quidditch, law enforcement, teaching, or writing and I might just show everyone why Dumbledore bound me to him...to control my magic.

Harry finally had enough and pulled away from the latest person. "I'm sorry. I still have homework." He said with an embarrassed laugh. He dodged away from Dumbledore's hands and fled from the Great Hall. He felt the bond start to activate and ignored it while he ran up the stairs. You can pass out in bed. He pushed himself to the second story and snarled as his stomach rebelled. You want to play it that way, Dumbledore? Harry smirked and changed his course to the Hospital Wing. He had a feeling that the nurse didn't know about the bond and would treat the symptoms. That would give Harry some peace from the meddling old coot for a little while.

Harry certainly felt ill by the time he forced himself through the doors of Madame Pomfrey's domain. He retched, but nothing came up. "Mr. Potter?" Madame Pomfrey asked in concern. "What's wrong?" She drew out her wand and levitated Harry to a bed. He tried to straighten

out and relax, but found himself needing to curl around his rebelling stomach. "You don't feel well at all, do you?" She asked as she conjured a basin. Harry could only shake his head as she went over to the potions' cabinet. He wondered how much good the potions would do in his state. He decided he would chance it. He didn't think Dumbledore would argue with Madame Pomfrey about her actions. She certainly didn't know about the bond. She would have said something about it.

Harry released the basin and allowed her to transfigure his uniform into pajamas. "There we are." She said in a kind voice that reminded Harry of Aunt Petunia. An unfamiliar lump raised in his throat. Was this...homesickness? "Take this one." She said as she passed a vial to him. Harry swallowed it and felt the nausea decrease to a manageable level. "This to reduce your fever." She said. Harry took it from her hand and nearly dropped it in shock when she reached out and smoothed back his hair. Harry swallowed hard, trying to ignore the persistent lump that made it hard to breathe. "Go on. Take it." Pomfrey said kindly. Harry did as he was told and then covered his face with his hands to calm himself. "Mr. Potter? Harry? What is it?" Pomfrey demanded. "What's the matter?"

Harry took a deep breath to fight back the tears that threatened to destroy his last shred of teenage dignity and lowered his hands. "I want to go home." He said honestly. "I miss my aunt."

"Five years of avoiding her like a dementor, and now you want to go home?" Pomfrey said in a skeptic voice. "What's changed?"

"She did." Harry answered. "May I go to sleep now?" He asked.

Pomfrey eyed him for a few seconds before nodding. "I'll check on you later. Do not leave this bed." She ordered. She gave Harry a look that promised certain death if he decided to do otherwise.

"No, Madame. I'll stay right here." Harry told her. He pulled the blankets up to his chin, put his glasses on the bedside table, and shut his eyes. He could see the light dim behind his eyelids. He turned over into his pillow and let out all the frustration, fear, and anger he

had ignored since he woke up here. He didn't see or sense Madame Pomfrey watching him.

Author's Note: Phew! Okay, remember the forums if you have any really pressing questions or if you notice a typo. Thanks for reading!

Author's Note: This chapter is dedicated to Sammy the iguana, who is the original "King of the Mountain".
(Flashback)

Dumbledore sat in his chair and considered himself lucky to see another Christmas Eve. The castle was nearly empty. Only Severus and Minerva had stayed this evening. He stared sadly at the charmed object in front of him. It was flashing. It meant that Professor Trelawney had said something out of the ordinary. A prophecy, most likely. He steeled his nerves and tapped the small silver object with his wand. A cloud of mist rose out of the device and coalesced into a circle. The One is hindered. Seven days of repression and rest will empower the One. His empowerment will lead to the defeat of his enemy. The One is hindered. Repression and rest will set him free.

Dumbledore stared at the circle for a few moments until it disappeared. He blinked and looked over at Fawkes. "Harry doesn't get much of a rest, does he, Fawkes?" Dumbledore asked the phoenix. Fawkes trilled and turned back to pruning his feathers. "Perhaps the boy is just tired. He's had some stressful times lately." Dumbledore mused to himself. "Seven days of repression and rest' is what he needs to get stronger, according to the prophecy. I've already started..." Dumbledore trailed off and one hand rose to stroke his beard. He lapsed into deep thought and considered his options. The sooner it happened, the sooner Harry could defeat Voldemort. A plan came to his mind. The only missing element was Harry Potter.

(end Flashback)

Harry accepted the folds of parchment from Kreacher and thanked him. The little elf bowed and disappeared with a tiny pop. Harry opened the folds of parchment to find two letters on the top. The first was from his aunt, expressing her worry over Harry and her fight with the Minister of Magic. Nothing was happening on that front, but she was "making a right pest of herself" to the Minister. Harry smiled at the phrase and folded the letter before slipping it into his pocket. The second was a letter from Remus, detailing the fight against the guardianship, Paul's worry for Harry, and Sensei's swearing habits. Harry was almost glad he was at Hogwarts. Sensei in a temper was

not a nice thing to see. He put the second letter away and looked at the next sheet. A small note was written at the top.

Harry,

These all accepted you without question. You just have to say the word.

Harry didn't need to see Remus's signature. He looked at the list of schools and smirked. He was holding a list of fifteen different magical schools, plus a list of seven different tutors, all willing to accept him on a moment's notice.

He folded the list away and used a touch of magic to stick it to the inside of his shirt. He wanted no one to find this list. It was his last desperate method of defense. He doubted Dumbledore would be pleased to know that Harry had somehow contacted other schools to ask for admission. In fact, the man would be livid. Harry couldn't wait to use it.

He looked through the rest of the paperwork, things that needed his signature for some of his holdings or approval for the teams Remus had hired to rebuild one of Harry's homes. Harry dried his signatures with a little spell and refolded them into a bundle. He penned a quick note to his aunt and Remus, guessing that they were together, as they often were since Harry had disappeared. Kreacher was always happy to make an extra trip if it was needed.

Harry called Kreacher and gave him the papers, smiling as the little elf gave Harry a million reasons as to why he enjoyed working for him. He sent the elf on his way and turned back to his homework. He missed his other classes. Magic was okay, and it was interesting to read about the theory, but he knew it was different for him. He no longer needed theory; he had instinct.

He felt Zen slither up his arm and come to rest on his head. "I'm King of the Mountain!" Zen had taken to playing the King of the Mountain game by himself, just because he was the only snake allowed to play, which meant he won every time. Harry could only roll his eyes at his antics.

“Harry,” Harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself. He turned and saw Ron standing in the doorway. “Dumbledore wants to see you.” Ron said, motioning for Harry to stand.

“Alright.” Harry said as he pulled on his outer robes and placed Zen in his special pocket. He didn’t feel comfortable in robes any more. They were restrictive and hindered his legs. McGonagall had to threaten points more than once for Harry not dressing properly. “Do you know why?” Harry asked Ron as he started down the stairs.

“No, I don’t.” Ron answered as he followed Harry down the stairs.

“Oh.” Harry fell silent as he left the Protectors dorm and started towards Dumbledore’s office. He noticed Ron walking next to him. “You don’t have to come with me, you know.” Harry told Ron with a smile. “I’m capable of getting there alone.” He laughed a bit and turned the corner.

“I know that, mate.” Ron answered with a smile of his own. “I just don’t get to spend any time with you anymore. Or talk to you. Or see you. Or...”

“Okay, I get it.” Harry said as he cut off Ron with a gesture. “You missed me.” Harry said calmly. “I didn’t know you cared, Ron.” Harry batted his eyes at Ron as he would at Bug. Ron didn’t appreciate it the same way Bug had.

“You know I care.” Ron snapped. “My family calls you their own, Harry.” Ron grabbed Harry’s arm and stopped him. “My mother worried about you for most of the year and you never bothered to contact her at all. Ginny cried over you. My entire family cares about you Harry, and you act like it doesn’t mean anything. You have only moped around here since coming back. You avoid me, Madame Pomfrey got you out of the morning training, training that you need more than anyone else, and you are trying to get away from me now.” Ron pushed Harry back against the wall and held him there. “What is wrong with you?” Ron demanded, holding onto Harry’s robes.

“Careful, mate. People might think we’re doing something.” Harry said with a leer. Ron’s face grew red. Wrong thing to say, Harry. Good job.

“You’ve changed, Harry, and it’s not for the better. Everyone sees this kid when they look at you, after you fought to be treated like an adult. You can’t have it both ways, mate.” Ron ground out. “The Protectors were made to protect you and the school, but we can’t protect you if you avoid us. You’re in danger, Harry.”

Harry had enough of Ron’s preaching. He reached up and pushed Ron off of him. “I’m always in danger! Every single second of my screwed up life! Voldemort’s attacked me several times, and I’m still standing. Think it’s luck? It isn’t luck. I’ve fought him off every single time, and I will fight him again. By myself. Protection doesn’t matter. What will come will come. Call it destiny or call it fate. Whatever you call it, just leave me alone!” Harry whirled and started to walk away, knowing he might do something he would regret if he stayed. Ron caught up to him and grabbed his arm again, forcing Harry around to face him. “Quit manhandling me!” Harry snapped as he pulled away from Ron.

“You won’t listen to anything else!” Ron shouted. “Perhaps your uncle knew something about you that we don’t!” The comment felt like a slap to the face. He couldn’t believe that Ron had just said that. Ron, of all people, threw Vernon’s abuse into his face. Harry pulled his arm from Ron and backed away from him. “Now stop acting like a spoiled kid and let me do my job.” Ron said, taking Harry’s arm gently and pulling him towards Dumbledore’s office.

Harry tolerated this for a few seconds. He recognized the symptoms of shock and took a deep breath. He pulled away from Ron again and took a step back when Ron reached for him. “Don’t touch me.” Harry snarled. “No one has any right to touch me.” Harry said calmly, remembering Paul’s words.

“I’m your Protector. I’m supposed to touch you. Stop messing around.” Ron said as he reached for Harry’s arm again.

Harry slapped Ron's hand away and took another step back. "You don't need to touch me to protect me." Harry said without emotion.

"You're irrational right now. Just let me do my job and every thing will be fine." Ron reached for him again and Harry backed away. "Stop being difficult." Ron said in a tone he used with the first years. That's it.

"Difficult?" Harry questioned. "Difficult?" Harry said a word he heard Bleys use that he was sure was a swear word. He glared at Ron and wondered if this was hatred he was feeling, or something else. "Sod off." Harry said shortly before stomping away.

"That was uncalled for!" Ron said as he came after Harry. "Stop acting like a child!" Ron barked at Harry.

Harry spun around to face Ron again and brought up his wand. He eyed Ron down its length and saw Ron's body tighten up in reaction to the threat.

"I'm not going to attack you, Harry." Ron said, raising his hands in a slight surrender. "There's no danger here, mate." Ron said slowly.

"Funny. My instincts tell me otherwise." He told Ron, backing away from the Weasley boy again. "Don't touch me. Don't look at me. Don't come near me again. I won't be responsible for my actions if you do."

"I'm not the enemy here, Harry." Ron told him as he tried to approach him. Harry kept him in place with a quick gesture of his wand tip. Ron stopped and resumed the surrender pose. "You can trust me, mate."

"I'm not your mate." Harry told him. "Not as long as you can't think for yourself." Harry watched Ron's face turn red again. "I can't trust you or anyone here." Harry called up his magic and sent a cloud of smoke into the hallway between him and Ron as he ran away. He felt the spell a second before it appeared and dodged. Ron had just tried

to stun him! Oh, yes. This friendship is over until Dumbledore stops making his decisions.

Harry ran down the hall and entered the girls' bathroom. He gave Moaning Myrtle a nod and hissed at the sink. The entrance to the Chamber of Secrets opened and he slid down the pipe, his wandless magic making it a clean trip, instead of the slime encrusted one he remembered from his second year. He landed at the bottom on his feet and sighed. He had a feeling that he wouldn't be able to stay down here very long, but he would take what he could get.

He walked past the rotting Basilisk and settled beneath one of the statues. Harry made a small gesture with his hand, and torches he hadn't known were there before flared to life with fire that cast a strange blue light. Hermione would want to study those. Another gesture of his hand banished the dust, debris, and rotting corpse to an unused classroom. Maybe he could give the corpse to Snape.

His eyes roamed about the room and stopped. Salazar Slytherin stared at him and Harry smirked. He found a private place with the Master of the Snakes. He leaned his head back and sighed. He figured he could stay here for a few hours before Dumbledore became impatient and used the bond thing. Probably until dinner. That was about two hours of peace he could have...assuming Ron didn't figure out where he had gone and Moaning Myrtle didn't give him away. Zen curled out of his pocket and looked around. "This man liked snakes." Zen said in an awed voice.

"He could talk to them, just like me." Harry told him with a smile.

Zen looked around him again before slithering towards the tallest statue he could find. Harry watched as the snake climbed up the statue and settled atop Salazar Slytherin's head. He checked for Harry's attention and hissed. "I'm King of the Mountain! I'm King of the Mountain!" Harry collapsed backwards in laughter at the snake's antics. Zen was the only king of the mountain in this hall of snakes.

"So, you can laugh!" Harry started at the voice and leapt to his feet, one of his throwing darts falling into his hand as he shifted into a

defensive position. His mind scrambled to identify the voice he had heard, and he relaxed. He shifted his hand so that the dart rested just inside his sleeve. He turned to see the vampire casually sitting against one of the pillars.

“Mr. Haven?” Harry was completely bewildered as to how the vampire had managed access to the Chamber of Secrets. “How did you get down here, sir?” He asked as he discreetly re-sheathed his throwing dart.

“Hm. The wards mean little to one who does not have a heartbeat. I’m invisible to them!” He announced, looking extremely pleased with himself. “The only question that remains is why are you here?” He asked Harry.

“I’m just avoiding a few people.” Harry answered honestly. “I needed to think.” He shrugged and sat back down. The vampire came over to stand next to him. “Why are you here?” Harry asked politely.

“A chance to spend time alone with such an intoxicating young man?” Khalid said slowly. “I couldn’t pass it up.”

“I’m not quite sure how to take that comment.” Harry said calmly. The vampire was very confusing.

“As a compliment.” Khalid said. “I have no intentions on your virtue.” The vampire said as he descended to sit next to Harry. Harry blushed and decided not to comment. He didn’t want to embarrass himself. He pulled out his lines for Dracula and decided that the vampire would do what he wanted. “What is that?” He asked Harry when he saw the book.

“My drama teacher at my other school wants me to perform ‘Dracula’ in the school play. I’m trying to memorize my lines.” Harry told him without looking up from his lines. He didn’t see the vampire’s eyes light up in glee, but he heard it in his voice.

“You get to play ‘Dracula’? A vampire? How wonderful!” Khalid said as he snatched the book away from Harry. “Dracula would be amused by seeing this play.”

“You’re talking like he’s a real person.” Harry said, tugging his lines back to him.

“He would be very offended to hear that you think he is nothing more than a fictional character.” Khalid told him as he released the notes.

“He’s real. And alive?” Harry asked in shock.

“Very much real and very much alive. He’s an artist right now, painting landscapes at night. He’s quite good.” Khalid offered. Harry could only shake his head in bemusement. Only he could learn that Dracula was still alive. “So, how do you act ‘Dracula’?” Khalid asked in an excited voice. “He was a prince, you know.”

“I don’t.” Harry admitted. “I don’t understand the character, which makes it really hard to act.” He explained with a wry look. “My first character came naturally, but this one is not making any sense at all to me. I don’t understand his motivations. I guess that I don’t really understand vampires.” He gave an embarrassed chuckle.

“That is easily remedied.” Khalid said as he bared his fangs.

“You’re not turning me.” Harry told the man sitting next to him.

“I do not plan on it.” Khalid said with an amused smile. “I could...what is the word...coach you?” He looked to Harry to see if he had used the correct word.

“Coach me? Really?” Harry asked for verification.

“Yes, really. Would you like to start now, seeing as your snake is occupied up there and we are here?” Harry glanced up at Zen and noticed he was still dancing his “I’m King of the Mountain” dance.

“I would like that.” Harry said as he stood up and closed his lines.

“I would, too. First, you need...” Khalid looked Harry over. “Walking lessons.” He said decisively.

“Walking lessons?” Harry blurted out. He already knew how to walk!

“Walking lessons.” Khalid said, advancing on Harry with a strange gleam in his eyes. “Too many young people tramp around like elephants. You should not. The walk should be light and dignified.” Khalid looked at Harry for a few seconds. “You said you played another character. Show me how he walked.”

Harry nodded and shut his eyes for a few seconds to bring up Edmund. He paced down the stones, turned, and went back to Khalid.

“Mm. We can work with that.” Khalid bent down to Harry’s bag. “Take off that...robe, jacket, coat, whatever you call that.” Harry followed that direction and waited for the next.

Harry and Khalid worked on his Dracula presentation and his lines for nearly three hours. It helped to have someone who actually knew the Dracula. Khalid turned out to be just as demanding as Bevie when it came to performance. His focus to details made Harry’s head hurt. Khalid often turned Harry’s head a fraction to the side or demanded phrasing against Harry’s instincts. He had to admit that Khalid’s instructions and corrections helped to flesh out the character, so he didn’t complain too much. There was only one thing he didn’t understand.

“Mr. Haven?” Harry said as he shifted his teeth out of the fangs the vampire had requested he produce. Saying the lines became much harder when it came to having pointed teeth in his mouth.

“I told you. Call me Khalid.” The vampire corrected gently. Harry kept forgetting.

“Sorry.” Harry said as he started to pack up his bag.

“No matter. What is your question?” Khalid asked, smiling as Harry fumbled with his books in nervousness.

“It’s sort of a personal question...I think.” Harry said. “You might not want to hear it.” He said with some trepidation.

“Ask and we shall see.” Khalid told him.

“It’s about...” Harry wondered how to phrase it. “...drinking blood.” He could only watch as the vampire gave an understanding and slightly evil smile.

“You want to know about drinking blood?” he asked.

“More like the motivation behind it. All of the books I have read say that there are two reasons – you need it for nourishment and it’s an uncontrollable urge. You seem pretty controlled to me, so I’m guessing the books have the wrong information.” Harry waited for an answer.

“Motivation?” Khalid ran his tongue along his top teeth as he smiled. “Hmm. That is difficult to explain. The urge is like any other urge rational creatures have, very like them. It is controllable, but it is much more fun to fulfill it. The best analogy for that is making love.” Khalid smiled as Harry blushed. “Still innocent?” he asked Harry in a jesting tone.

“I’ve been a little busy ensuring my continued existence.” Harry said, slightly peevish at the teasing.

“Do not worry over it.” Khalid said. “It will happen sooner or later.” The vampire seemed to think for a moment. “Later, preferably.” Harry only raised an eyebrow. “Hmm. I was going to say that it is like making love, only more intense, but you would have difficulty imagining the first, much less the second.” The vampire lapsed into a pensive silence.

Harry sat down on the floor and waited. He started running through his lines to pass the time. Khalid was obviously thinking, and he didn't want to disturb that. He had almost reached act two when Khalid spoke his name. Harry looked up to see the vampire smiling at him.

"There is a way I could show you exactly what the blood lust feels like." Khalid said as he stood and came over to Harry. "A way to let you feel what it is like."

"Okay." Harry said, standing from his own place on the floor. "What do we do?" Harry asked.

"You need to trust me." Khalid told him. Harry took a step back and stared. That statement made no sense at all. "Lower those impressive shields of yours." Khalid told him. "Allow me inside. Let me show you what it is like." Khalid whispered the last part of it.

Harry continued staring. That had to be the most absurd idea he had ever heard. Lower my shields? He's got to be kidding.

"Your secrets are safe. I am unconcerned with them. I'll be going to a different part of your mind." He said with a dismissive shrug.

Harry believed him. He actually believed him. One tiny part of his mind screamed not to trust Khalid. Harry ignored it. He dropped his first ring of shields and looked up from his shoes. "Okay. Show me what it's like." Harry said.

Khalid smiled at him as he stepped closer to Harry. "Relax." He instructed. "Put away your secrets. Lock them up, if you wish." Harry nodded and layered a few shields over them. "Take a few deep breaths. Relax as much as possible." Khalid rested a hand on Harry's shoulders, and Harry felt his body start to relax.

Harry dropped into deep meditation, something he had only achieved with Paul's assistance. "Good." He heard Khalid praise. He felt the vampire move behind him and stand close to him. "I must hold you. You will act on the lust otherwise." Khalid said as Harry felt a thin but strong arm wrap around in front of him, pinning his arms to his sides.

“Relax.” Khalid said in his ear when Harry had started to fight. Harry’s muscles listened to the command before he was aware of it, and Khalid made an approving noise. A cold hand settled on Harry’s forehead.

He was suddenly and desperately thirsty. Parched. He could hear things above and around him. Sounds. Heartbeats. Hundreds of heartbeats, and he somehow knew that those heartbeats would sate his thirst. He felt his teeth elongate in preparation to drink. The smell itself was enthralling, tangy and salty as well as sweet and cloying, all at once. He surged forward to find the source, only to feel a strong arm pull him back. It constricted his chest, and he couldn’t breathe. He panicked for only a moment until he didn’t need to breathe anymore. Power ran through him, and his thirst increased. He felt confined in his own skin, and then he didn’t. He was himself.

He opened his eyes and found he was curled in a ball on the floor. Khalid was sitting next to him. The vampire reached out a hand and rested it on Harry’s back. “Are you alright?” He asked in a worried voice.

Harry tried to sit up. Khalid frowned as he pulled Harry up to rest against his side. Harry allowed himself to rest on the vampire and sighed. It felt like Bleyss was holding him. “I’m fine.” Harry told him.

“Sure you are.” Khalid said with a knowing smile on his face. Harry thought about everything he had learned. He understood it now, the draw towards blood.

“Yeah.” He said tiredly. “How long was I out?” He asked.

“A few minutes. Perhaps five? No more than that.” Khalid said as he ran a hand over Harry’s head.

“It certainly helped me to understand vampires a little better.” He told Khalid. “Thank you. I don’t think I could have acted as a vampire without that.”

“No permanent damage then?” Khalid asked with a smile.

"I don't think so." Harry told him. "I just have an odd craving for some very rare steak." He admitted with a sheepish grin.

Khalid chuckled and stood, pulling Harry up with him. He put an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Come. You must be tired and you obviously need to eat."

"I'm not arguing with that." Harry said, leaning against Khalid. He was exhausted.

"Are you going to leave me up here?" Zen demanded from a spot on the roof.

"How did you get up there?" Harry asked. He looked up and found Zen hanging from a beam.

"I'm King of the Mountain!" He told Harry, as though that statement explained everything.

"I see." Harry lifted up a hand and called Zen to him. "Into your pocket. I don't feel like explaining you to Dumbledore just yet." Harry said to the snake. Zen hissed something that sounded like 'bring him on', but he wasn't sure. He hated when Zen mumbled like that.

Khalid led Harry out of the Chamber. Harry blinked and found himself in the girls' bathroom. "How...?"

"You are not the only one with gifts." Khalid told him with a satisfied air. He pulled Harry along and left the bathroom. Harry forgot everything in his efforts to stay awake. He blinked again and found himself in what was obviously Khalid's quarters. "Welcome to my rooms." He told Harry as he lowered Harry onto the edge of the bed.

"They're nice." Harry told him, slumping as the exhaustion started to make itself known.

“Mm. They are.” Khalid reached out and plucked Harry’s glasses from his face. Harry’s eyes followed the glasses, and he felt the vampire’s hands at his neck, undoing his tie.

“What are you doing?” Harry asked as he reached up to stop Khalid. His hands never made it. They dropped back into his lap.

“Putting you to bed, silly boy.” Khalid told him.

“Oh.” Harry couldn’t find any more strength for speech. He lifted his feet obediently as the vampire untied his shoes and slipped them off. He found himself in undershirt and pants about three minutes later. Khalid pulled down the blankets and gestured for Harry to crawl under them. He pulled the blankets over Harry and smoothed down his hair. “You are safe to sleep here, child. No one can enter these rooms without my express permission. I’m going to hunt. You sleep.” He told Harry.

“What about you?” Harry managed to ask as Khalid reached up to pull the curtains shut.

“Silly child. Vampires sleep in coffins.” He told Harry with a smile. “Sweet dreams.” He said as he shut the curtains. Harry’s eyes drifted shut as he heard the outer door close.

“It is time to wake up.” Harry heard a short while later. He pulled the blankets over his head and heard a chuckle. “You must wake up now.” He heard.

“No.” He said shortly. The annoying alarm clock of a person shouldn’t be waking him up. He had just fallen asleep.

“You’ve been asleep for almost thirty hours.” The voice said calmly. Harry recognized the lilt of the voice. Was that Khalid? “It is time to wake up.”

Thirty hours? Harry kicked at the heavy blankets covering him and tried to open his eyes. Bleargh. A warm cloth was pressed into his

hand and he used it to wipe his eyes. He opened them and squinted at the bright light. "Why's the sun so bright?" He croaked.

"Those are candles." Khalid said.

Harry blinked a couple more times and sighed. "Oh." He rubbed his eyes as he held out the cloth. "Thank you." He pulled himself into a sitting position and looked around. "Have I really been asleep that long?" He asked as he ran a hand over his hair.

"Yes. Perhaps longer, had I not decided to wake you." Khalid pulled the covers off him and pulled him to his feet. "The shower is running, and there are some clothes for you." He told Harry as he pushed the boy into the bathroom. Harry allowed the vampire to direct him and shut the door to the bathroom. He pulled off his shirt and wondered why he had worn such a tight one. He decided to ignore the underwear. He stepped into the shower and let the hot water beat down on him. He shook his head under the spray and sighed as he felt his muscles relax.

A sharp knock on the door woke him up, and he hurried through his shower before he fell asleep again. He stepped out and wrapped the waiting towel around him. He looked around through the steam in the air and found a pile of clothing waiting on a shelf. He looked at it and decided that it was not his, but no other clothing existed in the bathroom. Khalid had said clothing was waiting for him. Harry pulled on the clothing and decided that Khalid had some great taste. The shirt brought out his eyes and the trousers fit perfectly. He also wondered if he could get away with the pants. What would Aunt Petunia say when she found him with silk underwear?

He stepped out of the bathroom and looked down at the floor. "Now you look normal." Khalid said. "Like the prince you are supposed to play." Khalid said as he stepped up to Harry and handed him his glasses. Harry put them on and looked Khalid in the eye. Wait a moment? In the eye?

"When did I grow?" He asked, hearing the deeper version of his voice.

“Directly after I showed you what it’s like to be a vampire.” Khalid said. “I’m afraid that your uniform was ruined, though one of the house elves promised he could fix it.”

“Did anyone see me?” He asked Khalid.

“Just me.” Khalid answered. “Come sit down. You must be hungry.”

Yes, he was...ravenous! Harry sat down in the chair Khalid offered and accepted a steaming plate of breakfast food. He nodded his thanks to the vampire when the man poured a large mug of coffee. Harry ate so much that morning that he was sure Mrs. Weasley would have been amazed, and she had several bottomless pits to deal with on a daily basis. Khalid only smiled and offered more food once Harry’s plate emptied. Harry surprised himself by continuing to eat. “I can’t figure out why I’m so hungry.” He told Khalid as he slowed down.

“What we did was a bit of magic common to vampires.” He told Harry. “It is not really meant to be used on normal wizards.” He told Harry as he sipped at tea. “Then again, you are not a normal wizard.” He told Harry. “Magus, am I correct?” he asked.

Harry choked on a bit of pastry and gulped some coffee to help him swallow. “How did you know that?” He gasped.

“I can tell. One of my little abilities. I haven’t seen one like you in many years.” He told Harry with a reminiscent tone. “It is nice to see one such as yourself. The old ways have not died completely, have they? Do you require a wand?”

Harry raised a hand and made a stack of books float as an answer.

“You’ll do.” Khalid said. “I had thought you used your wand to call your snake to you.” Khalid said. “I was mistaken.” He said with a shrug.

“Where is he?” Harry asked, looking around for Zen.

“He slithered out about six hours ago. I’m sure he said something, but I couldn’t understand it. I’m sorry.” Khalid said.

“That’s alright.” Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on his snake. He felt Zen two floors away and smiled. “He’s curled up in a helmet.” He told Khalid. “I’ll get him later today.”

“Ah. Good.” Khalid said, refilling Harry’s mug of coffee.

Harry finally finished eating and pushed back from the table with a satisfied smile. “That was wonderful, thank you.” He said happily.

“I’m glad you ate. You were looking thin, but now...” He merely gestured at Harry.

Harry reached up and ran a hand through his hair in embarrassment. “It’s a part of my persona. It makes me seem harmless.” He told Khalid.

“Harmless? You?” Khalid laughed a bit as he stood and the dishes vanished. “You might want to make yourself harmless again. It is time I returned you to the halls. The headmaster is quite frantic.”

“ I almost forgot about him.” Harry said as he stood and concentrated on his shape.

“It’s been interesting to see the panic.” Khalid told him with a smirk worthy of the Malfoy family.

Harry nodded and concentrated on his body, returning it to “small and harmless” stage. Khalid only gestured at the clothes and Harry shrank them to fit him. “Thank you for the clothes. I can re-size them and return them to you.” Harry told him.

“Not necessary. I picked them out for you.” Khalid said happily. “They look wonderful.” He said as Harry found his satchel and put on his shoes. “Let us go.” He told Harry. Harry followed the vampire out of the rooms and down a hallway he hadn’t seen before. “Remember where I am. You’re welcome anytime.” He told Harry.

“Thank you, sir.” Harry said. That was great. He now had somewhere else to go besides the Chamber of Secrets.

“Yes. You still have your second act to master.” Khalid told him with a smile Harry secretly thought was sort of sadistic.

“Thank you again. I don’t think I would have been able to play Dracula without your help.” He told the vampire as they started down the stairs.

“You would have managed.” He told Harry as he put an arm around Harry’s reduced shoulders. Harry smiled at the compliment and allowed himself to fall silent. Would he have managed? Would he have been able to figure out vampires on his own without help? He doubted it.

“Harry.” Both Khalid and Harry stopped when they heard Dumbledore’s voice. “Where have you been, young man?” Dumbledore asked as he stepped out of the shadows.

“Hello, Headmaster. I’ve been with Mr. Haven. He was helping me with my homework.” That’s not a total lie. My lines are homework.

“Ah, I see. Well, thank you, Mr. Haven, for helping Harry. He has a lot of work he missed.” Dumbledore said with a warm smile.

I do not like the way he said that. It wasn’t my fault my aunt put me in St. Jude’s...it’s just my fault that I wanted to stay there. It took everything in his power not to scowl.

“Harry.” Harry looked up at the headmaster. “Come with me. There’s something I need to tell you.” He smiled at Harry as though to drive worry away. Is it my aunt? Hermione? Something else? I hate when he gets mysterious!

“Thank you for your help, Mr. Haven.” Harry told the vampire, releasing his top level of shields so the vampire knew he really meant to call him Khalid, but didn’t want to do so around Dumbledore.

“Any time.” Khalid said just before he vanished.

“I hate when he does that.” Dumbledore said with a tired sigh. “It hurts my eyes trying to watch him.” Harry smiled at Dumbledore and followed the man to his office. “Lemon drops.” Of course. His favorite candy.

Harry entered the office just behind Dumbledore and looked around. Nothing had really changed since the last time he had been here. Just hear what he has to say and then leave. You can relax after this.

“We’ve missed you in the Great Hall last night and today.” Dumbledore started. “No one knows where you disappeared to. Miss Granger was quite beside herself, as well as the rest of your friends.” Dumbledore said as he poured out tea. He passed a cup to Harry and poured one for himself. Well, if he’s drinking from the same pot, this should be safe. I’ll just wait until he drinks first. You’re paranoid, Harry. Completely and utterly paranoid.

“I lost track of the time, sir. This is Saturday, right? I didn’t realize I was obligated to spend my free time in the Great Hall, sir.” He told Dumbledore.

“Well, you being who you are, we were worried. Especially when I couldn’t find you. I can usually tell where you are. You just disappeared. We thought Voldemort had sent someone to find you.”

“Nope.” Harry said as he watched the headmaster sip at his tea. “No one to find me. Mr. Haven let me kip with him last night. We had been studying, and I lost track of the time.” Harry accepted a biscuit from the plate and smiled. Chocolate chip was always good for what ailed him.

“He didn’t touch you, did he?” Dumbledore asked sharply.

“Touch me?” Harry nearly dropped his cup in surprise. “No.” he told Dumbledore.

“Are you sure?” Dumbledore asked. “He seemed awfully familiar with you in the hallway, Harry. You are young and fairly inexperienced...”

“He didn’t touch me in any way like that. The most he did was mess up my hair...which didn’t help the bird’s nest up there.” Harry said with a smile as he ran his free hand through his hair. “Relax, Headmaster. I know the difference of ‘good touch’ and ‘bad touch’.” Harry told him. “I’d report anyone who tried that right away, not spend the night with them.”

“Alright, dear boy.” Dumbledore said, floating a silver object over to his desk. “This is what I wanted to show you.” Dumbledore said.

Harry eyed the tiny silver object and wondered what that could possibly be. “I set up some selective listening charms in Professor Trelawney’s quarters when you told me about the prophecy she made to you in third year.” Harry ignored the possible legal problems surveillance charms like that posed and waited for Dumbledore to get to the point.

“Ah, here we are.” Dumbledore said as he tapped the object. Harry watched as a small misty cloud appeared and turned into a ring. He listened in shock to Trelawney’s creepy prophecy voice talk about “the One”. He figured out that this was another prophecy about him. That, or there was another “One” out there. He figured that his luck had hit the jackpot twice.

“It’s about me?” Harry asked shakily, knowing it was. Dumbledore nodded gravely while Harry stared to one side. He noticed that his hands were shaking. What did ‘repression and rest’ mean? Had it already happened? He did spend a lot of time with Bleys...could that be ‘seven days’?

“Try some tea, Harry. It will calm you.” Dumbledore’s voice sounded very far away, as though he was speaking through a wall.

Harry raised his tea cup to his lips and swallowed half the cup in one go, only to start choking on the overly sweet taste. Several things

clicked into place at once as he dropped his cup and lurched from the chair. His wand appeared in his hand and he brought it up to face Dumbledore. "What are you doing to me?" he demanded.

Dumbledore gave him a benevolent look. "Sit down, Harry. I have a few things to explain to you." Dumbledore said calmly as though Harry was not threatening him with unknown spells.

"I'm fine standing, thanks." Harry snapped. "Make that explanation quick." Harry could barely keep the malice from his voice. "Or I'll do something you'll regret." He warned Dumbledore.

"Now I see how familial traits are passed. You're very like your aunt, Harry." Dumbledore said.

"Explanation. Now. Or I leave you to fight your own damn war." Harry snarled.

"Now, Harry. There is no need for vulgar language." Dumbledore saw that his statement did not bring an apology from the teenager. "Very well. You remember London?" Dumbledore asked. Harry gave a fraction of a nod and Dumbledore continued. "Your heart stopped, Harry. Your heart stopped because you did too much magic in that space of time. This is rarely heard of, much less witnessed. The last case was well before I was born, if you can imagine that." Dumbledore chuckled.

"Forgive me, Headmaster, but I have little patience for this. Get to the point. Now." Harry snapped as he began to feel odd.

"Oh, the point, eh?" Dumbledore asked. Harry couldn't believe it. Dumbledore was stalling! "Very well." He said after seeing Harry's grip tighten around the holly. "Your magic was obviously out of control." Dumbledore said as he poured himself another cup of tea. "I arranged an old ritual to allow you to return to magical learning with your magic firmly under control...my control, since you could not control it yourself." That's what you think. "It's a part of the magical guardianship."

“Imagine my surprise, yes, my surprise and my pride, that I could not control your magic. You were far too powerful for me to control. I’m so very proud of you, my boy, of you and your abilities. I knew you wouldn’t want to be spending time isolated from your friends or your schoolwork. So, I did what was best for you and slipped you a bit of potion that...uh, dampened, your magic, shall we say?” Harry nearly snapped his wand in fury. “Indeed, the guardianship was not finalized until you had your first sip of pumpkin juice in the Hospital Wing when you woke up.” Potter taken out by pumpkin juice. Potter: 0
Dumbledore: 1

“You suppressed my magic?” Harry spat at the Headmaster. He had never felt this angry at anyone before...not even Voldemort.

“Not ‘suppressed’, Harry. Dampened. Full suppression hasn’t happened yet.” Dumbledore said as he lifted a lemon drop from a tin and popped it into his mouth.

Yet? YET?? Oh, no. Not good. “Yet? Do you mean to say that the tea..?”

“Was a full dose? Yes, it was.” Dumbledore said happily. “Just seven days, Harry. Seven days and you will become more powerful. This is the power he ‘knows not’, Harry. This will allow you to defeat the Dark Lord. Then you’ll be free.” Dumbledore smiled at Harry. “You might want to sit down. I imagine you’re feeling a mite off.” Dumbledore told Harry.

“Are you mad?” Harry shouted. Fawkes disappeared in a cloud of flames. Good. Harry didn’t want the phoenix to witness the demise of Albus Dumbledore. “You’ve just given Voldemort the best chance he’ll have at defeating me!” Harry pointed out to the insane wizard sitting behind the desk.

“Don’t be silly, Harry. You’ll be staying in my quarters here. He won’t be able to get to you.” Dumbledore informed him. “I have a specially made Draught of Living Death for you. It will only last seven days. You’ll sleep the entire time.” Dumbledore droned on about Harry’s safety and how nice it would be for him to have a little vacation like

this, but Harry couldn't hear it. His hearing was muffled by the sound of blood rushing through his ears. Fury built in him as Dumbledore continued to speak, oblivious to Harry's condition. The world tipped and Harry fought to stand without swaying.

He looked up in time to see Dumbledore raise his wand at him. Harry did the only thing he could think of. He dropped to the ground and burst into tears. Nice distraction, Potter. Now all you need to do is curl your hair and you can be a proper girl. Harry told himself. The distraction worked. Dumbledore dropped his wand. Harry leapt to his feet and threw a chair in Dumbledore's way as he dashed for the door. He threw it open so quickly that he nearly took it off its hinges.

Get away, get away, get away. He chanted his mantra in his mind as he took the stairs two at a time. He dove through the closing doorway, neatly scraping his arm on the gargoyle. Stupid statue. Harry didn't pause long enough to make a decision as to direction. He ran to his right and started down the staircases. Please don't move. Please don't move. He begged the staircases as he was even more daring on the straight staircases.

He heard Dumbledore coming up behind him and he did a very foolish, very Gryffindor thing: he jumped over the railing. Dumbledore gasped behind him as he dropped. Harry landed on his feet, rolled to kill the momentum of the fall, and popped back up to his feet, thanking Sensei for making him learn how to roll out of falls. His shoulder would bruise later, but he was still moving for now.

He dodged around a corner and hit the floor when he noticed a stunning spell coming at him. "Casting spells on the defenseless, Dumbledore?" He snarled as he regained his feet and pelted down a hallway. "Bad form, old man." Harry muttered to himself. The doors to the grounds were directly in front of him. Freedom was his. He hit the doors at top speed and they exploded outward. He missed the stairs completely and tumbled onto the hard turf. The still frozen grass only exacerbated his bruised shoulder, but he found that his feet could still move. He dashed forward and felt like he had been yanked back as he stomach flipped. Stupid bond. Harry thought as he ignored the feeling and pushed himself onwards.

He risked a glance behind him and noticed that Dumbledore was just starting to descend the stairs with Professor Zareh behind him "William, you traitor." Harry muttered as he put on a burst of speed and disregarded the very real need to be horizontal. Rest later. Run now. He told himself. Pretend Sensei is chasing you because he caught you kissing his daughter. The thought actually worked and Harry's speed increased again. Hahahaha. He laughed in his head as he saved his breath for running.

He stopped suddenly as he retched and nearly fell over from the angle at which the earth was tipping. Stupid world. Stay straight. He thought as he pushed himself to his feet and started to move again. He didn't get much further. The bond only grew stronger and he fell to his knees. It's not fair. It's just not fair. He tried to stem the flow of tears as the injustice of the situation caught up to him. I want to go home! Please, just let me go home!

He pushed himself up again and took a few steps forward only to collapse on the ground when his strength gave out and his stomach threatened to come up itself. He felt the ring on his finger. "Home!" He hissed miserably. "Home!" He could feel the portkey trying to work. He inched himself closer to the gates. They were right there! Only a few more yards. He rolled up to his knees and tried again, hoping that he could make it, hoping that he could go home, hoping that he could avoid...

"Easy, son." Zareh said in his ear as strong arms wrapped around him and pulled him back. "I've got you."

"No!" Harry fought against the arms, feeling his magic surge very far away from where he could use it. "Let me go!" He pried at the hands and struggled to be freed.

"You're right, Headmaster. He does seem Confounded." Zareh said.

"I'm not Confounded." Harry said weakly as Zareh's grip tightened in response to Harry's fight.

“He’s been acting that way for some time. Ever since Mr. Haven returned him to us.” Dumbledore’s voice said. Harry struggled even harder when he heard how close Dumbledore was to him.

“Easy, lad.” Zareh said. “I’ve got you. It’s okay now.” Zareh adjusted his grip on Harry, freeing up one of Harry’s arms. Harry took advantage of this and drove his elbow into Zareh’s stomach. Zareh dropped him and Harry scrambled forward, overlooking his vision blacking out.

He hissed his password every other second, hoping that he would make it close enough to the gates for the wards to let him through. Dumbledore snatched at him once, but Harry gave a quick slap to his hand and scuttled forward. He felt Zareh raise his wand. “No magic, William. I’m not sure what happened to him.” Dumbledore said as Harry dropped to the ground again. Well, at least he’s not letting anyone cast spells at me.

“It’s going to be okay, Harry.” Dumbledore told Harry as he stepped up next to him. Harry shook his head, denying the headmaster’s claim. It wasn’t alright. It wouldn’t be okay. Nothing was okay.

Dumbledore put a light hand on his shoulder and rolled him over. Harry’s wand appeared in his hand as he faced Dumbledore. “Why don’t you give me that for now?” Dumbledore asked as Zareh came up on the other side of Harry. The old wizard reached out and plucked Harry’s wand from his grasp. “I have a potion for you, Harry.” Dumbledore said as Harry tried to move away. Harry shook his head. “It’ll just make you sleep.” Dumbledore’s hands were stronger than he looked. He pinned Harry down on one side and Zareh held the other.

“I just want to go home.” He said desperately, looking around for some kind of help.

“Poor boy doesn’t know where he is.” Dumbledore said to Zareh.

“Yes, I do.” Harry said. “Hell. Also known as Hogwarts.” He snapped tiredly as he turned his head away from the potion.

“He certainly doesn’t seem himself.” Zareh commented. They’ve all gone mad. I’m the only sane one here! Harry thought as he ignored Dumbledore’s attempt to get him to drink.

“Harry, just cooperate.” Dumbledore said sternly. “This will be a lot easier if you do.” Dumbledore’s patience was wearing out. Good. Harry fought against the hands pinning him to the ground.

“Is that Harry?” Harry’s heart leapt up. Hagrid! Hagrid would save him!

“Hag-!” Harry coughed and spluttered as some of the potion made its way into his mouth.

“Yes, it is, Hagrid. He’s not himself. Come give us a hand.” Dumbledore said to the half-giant. Harry gasped for air and shook his head. “Hold his arms and we’ll do the rest.” Dumbledore said.

“Poor Harry. Who did this?” Hagrid said as his hands pinned Harry to the ground.

“We are investigating it, Hagrid. Perfect, thank you.” He said. “William, hold his head, if you will.” This is assault! Kidnapping! And a bunch of other...oh, my head. His tears were unfeigned at this point. He felt horrible, he was freezing in the weather, and he was exhausted from fighting the bond. “Harry, open up, child.” Dumbledore said. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I’ll be happy to do summat abou’ it meself.” Hagrid grumbled as Dumbledore forced Harry’s mouth opened and poured the potion down his throat.

Harry gagged and choked on it, but it all went down. His vision was just starting to blur as they released his arms. “It’ll be alright, Harry.” Hagrid said as he dropped a heavy hand on Harry’s shoulder. “You jus’ trust Dumbledore.”

Harry looked up at Hagrid and shook his head. He fought against the lethargy spreading in his body as it dragged him down into darkness.

“Want...” he said quietly. “to go home.” He finished as his eyes drifted shut.

Harry felt Hagrid lift him from the ground. “Dear boy, I keep telling you that you are home.” Dumbledore said as Harry succumbed to the Draught of Living Death.

Author’s Note: Well, there it is. All twenty annoying pages of it. I hope you all enjoyed it. Please give me a few weeks before you expect another chapter. I’m exhausted! Thanks for reading!

Author's Note: Something my friend Jen came up with when I was telling her all my fanfiction woes and about this really cool icon I saw online.

Emma's Muse: Now...for this next chapter w-

Emma: No. I've had it up to HERE with you and your plot twists. The next chapter goes like this: "Rocks fall. Everyone dies."

Emma's Muse: But the plot...and the fans...and Harry!

Emma: ROCKS FALL! EVERYONE DIES!

Emma's Muse: (hides)

Enjoy the chapter. I'm off to the land of Middle-Earth. Who knew I could write a paper on Tolkien? In university!

Dumbledore smiled down at the sleeping boy and reached out a withered hand to stroke the cheek. Harry didn't move and Dumbledore's smile grew wider. He knew the boy disagreed with his actions and thought about the new prophecy. He knew that the boy would hate him when he woke up. He also knew that this might break their relationship beyond repair. He sighed and grasped Harry's limp hand in his own, pressing it between his hands and trembling at the thought of losing a child he considered one of his family. It was for the best, he knew, but why did it have to hurt so much? To lose this boy hurt far more than he ever thought it would.

He sighed and caught his trembling bottom lip between his teeth. He stood and placed Harry's hand back in a restful position. He smiled a little ruefully and hoped the boy would forgive him for House prejudices when he saw the red and gold pajamas. Dumbledore reached out and pulled the coverlet over the child, no, his child, and smoothed it out. His hand reached out and ran through the boy's hair a few times before he tore himself away from the peaceful sight of Harry sleeping. Dumbledore knew he needed to go down to dinner, but he hesitated to leave the boy alone. He didn't want Harry to wake up confused. He knew it would be a week before Harry woke, but that didn't ease the worry he felt when Harry looked so small, innocent,

and defenseless as he lay under the blankets. "I can only hope that you'll forgive me in time, my son." Dumbledore told the prone figure as he drew away. He stopped and reached out to run a hand through the boy's hair one last time...

Something was stroking his hair. It was a light touch, and it seemed to want to keep Harry from coming awake. Harry fought up through the lethargy drowning his limbs. Something was wrong with him. He never felt like this. He was never this tired. "Back with the world, child?" a soft voice asked him. Harry's mind immediately shifted to the task of identifying the voice. Soft, kind, with a hint of accent...

"Bleys." Harry whispered.

"Yes, that's right. I hadn't thought you'd need me again." He told Harry as he lifted Harry upright and wedged a pillow behind Harry's back. "Then again," he said as he pushed Harry back into the pillow, "I've been wrong before." He chuckled a bit and patted Harry's hand.

"What's wrong with me?" Harry asked as he fought to keep his eyes open.

"Dumbledore got to you." Bleys said as he stood from the edge of the bed and went to the fireplace. "I'm sorry I told you to fool him, to let him think you were nothing more than a child. This may not have happened had you acted differently." Bleys picked up a small cup and started spooning something from the cauldron. "He suppressed your magic and gave you Draught of the Living Death." Bleys sprinkled some black powder into the cup and swirled the liquid. "What Dumbledore forgot, and not surprising because he is not a first class Potions Master, is the wormwood in the Draught of the Living Death, and the nettles from most common suppression potions are not good bedfellows."

Harry could only stare at the man through half-closed eyes. "Huh?" was the only thing he could manage as Bleys came back and sat down on the bed again.

"He poisoned you, child." Bleys told him gently. "By accident, I am sure, but all the same." Bleys moved closer and a large basin

appeared next to him. "His actions allowed me to bring you here. Hopefully, no permanent damage has been done." Harry's mind was practically howling, but all he could manage to let out was a pathetic whimper. "Yes, I know." Bleys said in sympathy. "Now, this is not going to be pleasant." Bleys warned Harry as he shifted the boy into his arms. "It's going to be dreadful, in fact, but it'll clear out the poison that much faster." Bleys lifted the cup to Harry's lips. "Drink all of it." He ordered.

The potion wasn't all that bad. It tasted like peppery lemonade with a hint of fresh earth. He gulped it down and sighed, fully expecting Bleys to put him back to bed to sleep off the effects. It didn't happen. He found his chest resting on Bleys's legs with his head hanging down over the basin. "Wha-" What followed was Harry's worst experience with sicking up.

He wasn't sure how much time passed...he also found that he didn't care. He retched one more time and shuddered when only acid came up. "It's over. You're finished." Bleys said as he moved Harry back a bit. Harry grabbed Bleys around the waist and rested his head on the man's lap. He felt drained and sick, freezing and weak. Dumbledore had nearly killed him. "You're safe now." Bleys said, running a hand through Harry's sweaty hair.

Harry lay there for a while, enjoying the sensation and gathering his strength. "Can I kill Dumbledore?" he asked with weary tones.

Bleys chuckled and his hand moved from Harry's hair to massage the corded neck muscles. "I'm sure you are capable, but you have some ethical issues to consider."

"Don't care." Harry muttered petulantly. His eyes shut and he sighed.

"You do care. Otherwise, you would have just killed him without asking." Bleys said as his other hand played with Harry's hair.

"I hate when you're right." Harry told him.

“I know, son.” Bleys said with a laugh. “Let’s get you cleaned up and then you can sleep for a while.” Bleys said as he picked Harry up from the bed.

“Am I small again?” Harry asked in tired alarm. He actually wouldn’t mind being small again; it would give him an excuse for letting Bleys cart him around.

“No.” Bleys answered as he carried Harry into the bathroom.

“Then how can you pick me up?” Harry demanded as he heard water start filling the bathtub.

“I do believe that it is called ‘magic’.” Bleys answered as Harry’s clothing disappeared, and he lowered the boy into the steaming water.

“Remind me to roll my eyes later.” Harry said as he relaxed into the water.

“Alright. Close your eyes.” Harry complied as Bleys poured water over his hair. It was nice to be back here again.

“Son, it’s time to wake up.” He heard as someone smoothed a hand back over his hair. “I know you can hear me.” Bley’s voice said.

“Ok.” Harry said as he fought to open his eyes. “Just a minute.” He rolled over and untangled himself from the blankets. “Why can’t I sleep more often? It seems that I just want to sleep, but no one will let me.” Harry said as he stood from his bed and stretched.

“The curse of a youngster, I suppose.” Bleys nudged Harry towards the bathroom. “Merlin said much the same thing when he was your age.” Bleys told Harry with a smile.

“I’m seeing disturbing patterns between the two of us.” Harry grumbled, weaving around the furniture and over Alden’s prone and still sleeping form. Even the dog gets more sleep than I do. Harry thought.

“Oh, the two of you are similar.” Bleys called after him. “You both have such wonderful dispositions in the morning!” Harry shut the door on Bleys’ laughter and started his bathwater. Were all adults this annoying in the morning?

Harry found himself hustled out into the sun first thing in the morning. Bleys seemed happier to have Harry back than Harry was to be there. He needled Harry into answering questions about how life had been since the last time they had been together. Harry was soon seated on a log in the middle of the woods relating everything Dumbledore had done or said to him since he was in the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts. The thing that had bothered him the most was the reason he had gotten sick when he tried to leave.

“Sick when you left the castle?” Bleys asked. The man stripped a piece of rotting bark from the log and started to shred it between his fingers. “Dumbledore was giving you a suppression potion, right?”

“As far as I know. My pumpkin juice tasted too sweet every time I had it.” Harry answered.

“Mm.” Bleys dropped the shredded bark and closed his eyes. “Let me think.” He told Harry in a soft voice. “There has to be an answer.” Harry nodded even though his teacher couldn’t see him and waited. Alden dropped onto his feet and he reached down to scratch the dog’s ears. Alden dropped to the ground in bliss, crushing Harry’s feet under his furry and suddenly boneless body. “He tied you to him and the castle somehow.” Bleys said shortly as his eyes popped open. He stood and started walking further into the woods.

“He what?” Harry asked.

“You said that he couldn’t control your magic without suppressing it.” Bleys said. “Perhaps he grounded his strength to the castle. From what you’ve said, Hogwarts sounds practically sentient. He could have used Hogwarts to boost his power and ground it. Once he managed that, he was able to step in as magical guardian. Having a magical building as part of himself would give him the extra power he needed to build this bond and keep you grounded.”

“But he used it to try to keep me within so far of him. After the Order meeting...”

“Yes, that’s true, but who says he couldn’t manipulate the bond?” Bleys answered. “He manipulated it to keep you where he wanted. With that much power, well, he’d be able to do as he liked.”

Harry trotted after Bleys. “Are you saying that he could control everything in the castle?” Harry demanded. That did not sound good. In fact, it sounded terrible. Dumbledore with that much power...it was a catastrophe waiting to happen.

“Well, he could.” Bleys said. “I have a feeling that he was more focused on you than any thing else.” Bleys told him.

“So, all I had to do was wave my little hand and then I could have broken the ritual and left?” Harry asked.

“The potion presented some difficulty.” Bleys told him. “Remember, the physical aspect of your magic is the most vital part of it. Your magic is limited by your physical state.”

“Right.” Harry nodded and reached out for his magic. It bubbled up through him, and he wrapped it around him. “You know, I missed this at Hogwarts. I couldn’t really do it. My magic was there, but there was something between us. I didn’t even notice it until it was gone.” Harry confided as his magic soothed him into heady intoxication.

“It makes you feel almost invincible, doesn’t it?” Bleys asked.

Harry shuddered as he nodded. He was invincible. He had forgotten that he had no limits on his magic. Dumbledore had made him forget what magic really felt like. He couldn’t believe that he had forgotten. “Yes, invincible.” Harry agreed.

“Mm.” Bleys sounded off. Harry looked up at him in time to see Bleys’ hands grab him and throw him against a tree. One of Harry’s hands flew up, and Bleys’s hand lashed out. Harry gasped in pain

and stared at his hand. It was stuck to the tree with a dagger. His hand was pinned to the tree trunk with a dagger. A dagger was in his hand. His brain processed this, and he looked up at Bleys in shock. What-? A fist slammed under his chin.

Bleys caught Harry as he slumped from the tree trunk. He hated hitting anyone. It hurt his hand something awful, and he was sure that Harry would agree that it had been fairly painful for him, too. A thought removed his dagger from Harry's hand and stanching the bleeding. Bleys lifted Harry and carried him back to the cottage. Looks like I had one more lesson to teach him.

"Ow." Harry said the moment he regained consciousness.

"Welcome back from your ego." Bleys commented from his stool next to the bed.

"You could have said 'your head is getting too big, Harry'. I would have listened." Harry said dryly. "Ow."

"Stop whining. You were off into magic. You couldn't have heard me if you wanted." Bleys washed the cut a final time and then frowned down at it. He could heal it without or without pain. The important thing now was how to heal it. Had Harry learned his lesson?

"You don't know that." Harry grumbled. He watched as Bleys raised a hand to his hand. "Let it scar." Harry said calmly.

"What?" Bleys asked, shifting his eyes up to meet Harry's.

"Let it scar." Harry said firmly. "I'll need a reminder when I start thinking I'm invincible again." Harry told him as he shifted back into his bed. Well, that solved that question, Bleys thought, as he healed the hand with a twist of his wrist.

"You have to go home now." Bleys said as he pulled Harry up.

"Now?" Harry questioned.

“Yes, now.” Bleys said firmly. “You’ve been here a week.” Bleys explained. “It’s more than enough time for you to recover from poisoning.”

“Why do I keep coming back here?” Harry asked curiously. “I feel like I’ve known you all my life.” He said solemnly.

Bleys studied Harry for a few seconds before dropping down onto the bed next to him. “You have been here before, Harry.” Bleys said slowly. “You’ve spent quite a bit of time here.”

“Yeah. I feel like I know you from before all that time, though.” Harry shrugged as though to dismiss the feeling.

“You have. I’ve seen you nearly every time you have been near death.” Bleys told him.

“What?” Harry burst out.

Bleys gave Harry a sidelong glance and nodded as he put an arm around Harry’s shoulders. “Yes, every time you nearly died. I first saw you when you were just a little baby. It was only for an instance, but I saw you, wide-eyed and not quite sure what had happened to you. Once or twice when that uncle of yours went just a little too far. That time you fell out of the tree. Your first year at Hogwarts...your second year at Hogwarts...your third year at Hogwarts.” Harry stared at Bleys. “Yes. You’ve had quite a few brushes with death.” Bleys told him. “I’m your guardian in this realm between life and death.” Bleys explained.

“You couldn’t tell me before?” Harry asked.

“No.” Bleys answered shortly as he stood. “You needed training for wandless magic. Do you think you could have listened to me about magic if you knew that you would see me again the next time you skirted death?” Bleys asked.

“Who says I will skirt death again?” Harry asked shortly. “I’m having my doubts.” He said honestly.

“You’ll make it.” Bleys said with a smile. “You always do.”

“Maybe I’m tired of it all.” Harry said, turning away from Bleys. “Maybe I don’t want to continue against Voldemort, or fighting with Dumbledore. Maybe I just want to be normal?” Harry demanded.

“True. You could die. That has always been an option for you.” Bleys said, moving up behind Harry and reaching up to put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Or you could fulfill that destiny of yours and start to live.” He whispered.

Harry shuddered as the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Those words sounded almost like a prophecy, and that meant Harry already hated them a second after hearing them. He decided to ignore them for now. “So, why didn’t I see you before I got my hands on that book?” He asked.

“I arranged for the book to be a trigger to allow you to see me when you were ready for training.” Bleys admitted. “It worked better than I thought.”

“You arranged...”

“Don’t think about it too hard, son. It’s very confusing, plays with time and has absolutely no logic.” Bleys told him with a smile that said even Bleys himself found it confusing. He stepped forward and gave Harry a serious look. “There are greater things that exist than us, Harry. Greater powers in the universe than us. Don’t you think those greater powers would arrange the things they put into motion, as they know the outcome of what they do?”

“Okay.” Harry said. He felt like his brain would explode if he tried to figure out what Bleys had meant by that entire convoluted sentence.

“Alden will be going with you.” Bleys said suddenly, startling Harry out of his thoughts. “He’s your familiar. I picked him out for you.”

“I thought he was yours?” Harry asked in shock. “I have Hedwig.” He said as Alden started pawing at him.

“No, he’s just been staying with me while he was waiting for you.” Bleys said. “He seems very excited. Just don’t allow him to tear out Dumbledore’s throat. You’ll never get out all the blood from his fur.”

Harry couldn’t help himself. The laughter bubbled out of him before he could stop it. It was an entirely morbid thought, but it also seemed funny to think of himself scrubbing a very satisfied Alden free of blood. “Aunt Petunia’s not going to like this. She doesn’t like animals.” Harry told Bleys. “I’m going to have to sneak him in the house.”

“Do what you must, but take him with you. He’ll help keep you relaxed so you don’t accidentally blow something up.” Harry glared at Bleys for the blowing up comment. That incident with Aunt Marge was an accident.

“So, what should I do about Dumbledore?” Harry asked.

“Show him a little power and then leave. It was a mistake to tell you to mislead him. You should have shown him what you could do straight away. He may have not enforced such restrictive measures for you.”

“Can I hurt him?” Harry asked.

“We’ve already been over this.” Bleys said as he straightened “He’s a powerful ally, but he can be just as powerful an enemy. Choose your battles, son.” Bleys patted Harry’s arm. “Now, get out of here. There are people waiting on you. I don’t want to see you again until you’re old and gray, understand?” Bleys was trying to be stern, but he couldn’t quite pull it off with that look in his eyes.

“Sure.” Harry gave the man a swift hug before stepping back. “Alden, you ready, boy?” Harry asked, bending down to rub behind the dog’s ears. Alden only thumped his tail on the floor and glued himself to Harry’s side. “I’ll see you later.” He told Bleys.

“Much later.” Bleys agreed. He merely nodded to Harry and walked away. Harry shut his eyes and focused on taking Alden with him. He

jerked when he felt the floor leave his feet and something incredibly soft under him. He opened his eyes and saw that he was in a room somewhere in Hogwarts. The canopy bed was done up in Gryffindor colors, and Harry discovered that he was in red and gold as well after a quick inspection. Gryffindor much, Headmaster? Harry sat up. Alden lounged next to him and panted at him.

“Who’s a good dog?” Harry asked Alden as he stroked the animal’s ears. Alden went boneless, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. Harry nudged the animal’s body off him and fought to get out of the blankets. His bare feet hit the floor, and he noticed that the entire floor had fluffy rugs in Gryffindor red. This is almost nauseating. Harry thought to himself. Those colors were everywhere. Harry looked around for clothing and frowned when he couldn’t even find the clothing Khalid had given him.

Harry stood and reoriented himself. He had been with Bleys a week...that meant he had only been asleep an hour here. Oh, Dumbledore was going to freak out when he realized that Harry had only slept an hour with Draught of the Living Death and... Harry felt a surge of anger in the pit of his stomach. Dumbledore had poisoned him. With the best of intentions, of course. He remembered the saying about the road to Hell being paved with good intentions and tried to calm himself. His magic didn’t want to listen to him. It was outraged on his behalf. Dumbledore had nearly killed him. Dumbledore was responsible. Dumbledore had to pay.

Harry let out his magic a little bit and felt a breeze start in the room. It ruffled his hair, and he took a few deep breaths to calm down. It wasn’t working. Dumbledore wouldn’t stand in his way again. Not anymore. He wasn’t going to let that old coot do anything to him any more. Harry was a full-grown wizard with fully mature magic. He didn’t need anyone to protect him. Harry raised his hands and stared at them in shock. His magic would do it! His magic could destroy anything that stood in his way, and he would be invincible! No one would be able to harm him or take away his freedom again. Harry could protect himself from anything that- oh. Harry stared at the scar still on his left hand, and he felt his magic die down around him. His crazy thoughts skidded to a stop.

His magic could destroy everything. It could happen. Why should it? Harry sighed and looked at Alden. "I bet you think I'm completely mental." He told the animal. Alden merely yawned and burrowed into the covers. Harry smiled and rolled his eyes at his familiar. His aunt was going to kill him about Alden. He only hoped she would spare his life long enough for him to explain. He hoped Remus would be there when he got home. The man would prevent immediate bloodshed, he was sure.

"Kreacher!" He called.

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir?" Kreacher said in the next instant.

"Hello, Kreacher. I was wondering if you could do something for me?" He asked politely.

"Kreacher is happy to do something for Harry Potter!" The elf said, bouncing in place.

"Thank you, Kreacher. Could you bring me one of my Muggle suits with shoes and tell my aunt that I'm coming home?" He asked the elf.

"Kreacher will." The elf disappeared with a tiny pop.

"We're going home, Alden." Harry said as he rubbed the dog's belly with both hands. "Won't that be fun?" Alden responded to Harry's affection by licking Harry's nose. "Eww." Harry stopped petting his dog and wiped the drool off his nose.

"Aunt Petunia says that she wants an explanation when Harry Potter gets home." Kreacher said in the next second as he popped in. "She sends your suit and shoes, a bag of things Aunt Petunia thinks Harry Potter needs, plus a comb and...this." Kreacher held up a bottle of hair gel.

"Yes!" Harry said as he took the things from Kreacher. "No more bird's nest." He said happily. "I'll be home within the hour, Kreacher. Could you go home and wait for me?" He asked.

Kreacher didn't bother responding. He simply disappeared. Harry smiled at the elf's antics and started throwing off the Gryffindor pajamas. What was he thinking?" Harry wondered aloud about Dumbledore's color choices. "Would the colors influence me while I slept or something?" He snickered to himself and pawed through the bag. He blushed a bit when he realized that he had forgotten to ask for pants and socks. Aunt Petunia thought of everything. He dressed quickly and fought with his hair for a few minutes without a mirror (Rick would have died at that thought). He was just tying his shoes when the door flew open to admit a frantic looking vampire.

A quick movement brought a throwing dart into Harry's hand while the other flew into a defensive posture. "Well, it looks like you don't need rescuing!" Khalid Haven said from the doorway. "Here I thought I could carry you off to meet the real Dracula. My plans are dashed."

"Sorry to disappoint, Khalid." He told the pouting vampire. "I'm about to go confront Dumbledore with a huge mistake he made, if you'd care to watch." Harry said as he sheathed his dart.

"Was his mistake a really big one?" Harry could almost see the vampire in a five year old's body, jumping up and down and asking about his trip to the ice cream store.

"He nearly killed me." Harry said with a shrug. That's true. He did. I had better not overdo this. Hope the shock doesn't kill Dumbledore; he still has his uses.

"Was it also a stupid mistake?" Khalid said with growing interest.

"Absolutely." Harry said.

"Then I shall be honored to accompany you, my fine man." Khalid moved out of the way for Harry, and Harry found himself in Dumbledore's office. I guess the man was serious about me being in his quarters. Harry moved through the office and down the revolving staircase with little trouble. Alden trotted along beside him, acting every inch of protective puppy that would abandon all work for a belly scratch.

“Have you thought about how you will confront him before you return home?” Khalid asked as he examined his fingernails. Harry had to wonder why vampires were considered vain.

“With the truth.” Harry said calmly. “He needs to know that his ‘for the best’ attitude nearly killed me and that I’ll be making my own decisions without his input from now on.” Harry confessed to the man next to him.

“Dumbledore is a very powerful wizard, Magus.” Khalid said as he clasped his hands behind his back. “You may find it difficult to maneuver around his actions.”

“What did you call me?” Harry asked quietly. Alden nudged his leg and panted up at him. He stared down at the dog, wondering why Bleys had thought to give him as a familiar. What good was a familiar when he couldn’t speak dog?

“Magus.” Khalid told him. “That is what you are.” Khalid said with a smile.

“Please continue calling me ‘Harry’.” Harry told him. “I have no use for titles.” Harry said as he fought to keep from cringing. “The Boy Who Lived” was bad enough. He didn’t need anything else like it.

“Very well.” Khalid said with a grin. “I wish to go in before you.” Khalid said with an eager expression on his face. “This is going to be the best entertainment since that silly accident with those fireworks.” Harry was a little confused by what the vampire had meant, but he didn’t have time to ask him as he disappeared. Alden lay down at his feet and sniffed.

“I guess this is it, huh, Alden?” Harry said to the animal. “Did you want to come in with me, or will you wait here?” Alden jumped to his feet and gave Harry a look that said ‘you need someone with you’. “Thanks.” He reached down and scratched Alden’s ears. “Guess I should do this.”

“Not without me!” Harry turned to see Zen slithering down the hallway at top speed. “Can’t you keep yourself out of trouble while I’m napping?” He demanded as he came to a stop at Harry’s feet. “Let’s let some insane wizard poison you while Zen is sleeping! Yes, that’s a brilliant idea!”

“Are you upset with me?” Harry asked in surprised. “I don’t plan these things, you know.” Harry was just a little peeved.

“Yes, I know, which makes these events all the more disturbing.” Zen told him. “Now, you’re going to pick me up and put me in that pocket, and then you’re going to do what you came down here to do. After that, we are leaving.” Zen lectured Harry. “Do you understand what that means, lightning child? We are leaving. No more silly wizards, no more changing staircases or humming armor. We are going back to a sane world.”

“Sure, Zen. I’m ready to go.” Harry lowered his arm, and Zen curled around his wrist. Harry placed the little snake in his pocket and sighed. He couldn’t help the strange things that happened around him. They just...happened.

Harry took a deep breath and smoothed his clothing down. He wasn’t nervous. No, that didn’t fit him at all. He was apprehensive. Harry knew that the guardianship would break at the slightest thought. He didn’t need to worry about that. Something just felt off.

The doors opened, and Harry pedaled backwards away from them. The teachers rushed from the Great Hall, only to stop when they saw Harry standing there. Students starting, crowding around the teachers, filling in the spaces between the confused educators. “Good evening, Headmaster.” Harry said calmly.

“Harry.” Dumbledore said. “I thought you were resting.” Dumbledore was staring at Harry, as though trying to figure out what, exactly, happened in the hour that had passed.

“Yes.” Harry paused before turning to Snape. “Professor, what would happen if a person ingested a common magical suppression

potion and Draught of Living Death?" Harry hadn't thought it possible for Snape to go any paler than he already was.

"The ingredients contained in those potions would combine to form quite a lethal dose of poison in a human's blood stream." Snape answered with an almost undetectable quiver to his voice. Harry could practically feel the man's thoughts of "please tell me I won't have to save you from such a combination". Harry nodded to the man in thanks before turning back to the headmaster.

"Your mistake nearly cost me my life, sir." He told Dumbledore in a serious tone. "It makes me question exactly how safe I am here." Harry heard several gasps go up from behind the teachers, and one anguished "Bloody hell!". Welcome back, Ron, he thought with a smirk. "I'm going home, Headmaster." Harry said, drawing himself up to his full 'harmless' height.

"I'm afraid I can't let you leave the safety of the castle, Harry." Dumbledore said calmly. "You know how dangerous it is for you." He appeared to be trying to give Harry a significant look that was supposed to mean something, but Harry ignored him. Harry reached out with his magic and touched the wards and spells surrounding Hogwarts. I need to leave now. Harry told the castle. He felt something warm like sunshine bubble up and smother his senses for a moment before receding. Harry gave his magic a quick twist and felt something snap inside him. Dumbledore actually lurched on his feet for a second before lifting surprised eyes to stare at Harry.

"You know, Headmaster. There was a time when I actually trusted you." Harry said nonchalantly as he stepped forward towards the man. "A time when I would have called you my closest confidant. A surrogate grandfather, family." He shrugged and studied the aged wizard in front of him as he ignored all of the other teachers. He raised his wand and studied Dumbledore's aged face for a few seconds. "You're slipping, Headmaster." He said as his voice dropped to a whisper so none of the students could hear him. "You've endangered me more than Voldemort ever has. Your little trials you've put me through each year left me unable to function. Nightmares haunted me both day and night. My aunt had to send me

to a mental hospital so that I could find some peace. What would I have found here, under your omniscient care? 'Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori'?" Harry quoted the poem he and his classmates had studied at St. Jude's and smirked when Dumbledore paled. "I'm not your puppet; I'm not your student, and I'm not your savior. Not anymore. Don't come near me again. Do not attempt to contact me. Do not even speak as though you know me as you would a grandchild. In fact, forget I exist. Come September, I may or may not return here. Whether I do or not is up to you." Harry whirled away from him and started walking away.

"Harry, I have always tried to do what is best for you." Dumbledore said with a voice filled with tears.

Harry turned and studied the man. There was true regret in his voice. Tears were welling up in his eyes. "Not anymore." Harry told him with a smile.

"Suppression potion and Draught of Living Death!?" Snape demanded as soon as Harry turned away. "You practically did the Dark Lord's work for him!" Harry wondered if he should call off Snape's attack...nah. Dumbledore had this coming. He deserved to be lectured by the Potions master. "Headmaster, I cannot believe you would make such a mistake. You could have killed Harry Potter!"

"You did what?" Hagrid boomed over the chaos erupting in the hallway. Harry went down the hallway and wondered how crazy things were about to get at Hogwarts.

"Dumbledore, you great fool!" Harry cheered a little inside when he heard Madame Pomfrey attack Dumbledore. "I've not spent the last five and a half YEARS patching that boy up only to have you undo all of my hard work! Have you any idea how difficult it is to keep him in a hospital bed?!"

Harry was hard-pressed to continue walking at that point. Hearing Snape go on about his life was a little too much for him, and Pomfrey's promises to dismember Dumbledore the next time he tried such 'an idiotic and blatant display of stupidity' made him wonder how

lethal medical professionals could be when pushed beyond their limits. He left the building and stopped when he saw Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Ginny waiting at the bottom of the stairs. "Dumbledore nearly killed you?" Ron asked in a shocked and wounded voice.

"With the best of intentions, I'm sure." Harry said as he eyed Ron. He gave a quick glance behind to see Dumbledore trying to fight his way out of the crowd that surrounded him just inside Hogwarts doors.

"Bloody hell." Ron said tightly. "Mate, I'm sorry." He told Harry. Harry smiled and stepped forward. He reached out and squeezed Ron's shoulder.

"Welcome back, mate." He told the red-head. "Now, my aunt's expecting me home." He told the boy. "Write to me, okay? Hedwig will make sure I get it." Harry smiled at his friend and brushed past him

"I'll see you guys this summer?" Harry asked, looking at the gathered students in front of him.

"Your aunt wouldn't survive if she doesn't let me see you." Hermione said with a smile. "You go ahead and go, Harry. We'll make sure to create a few headaches for the staff so they won't be able to come after you for a little while." Hermione smiled at him.

"Thanks." Harry looked up and noticed Snape and Dumbledore engaged in a fierce verbal match about Dumbledore's various shortcomings when it came to potions and the administration of said potions when a dunderhead doesn't know what he is doing.

Harry smiled and thought that that couldn't have gone any better than if he had planned it out in advance. He stopped and closed his eyes. He focused on his aunt's home and reminded himself that he did not have limits on his magic anymore. He looked at the wards and saw how they were built. He imagined himself going in between two and felt his body start squeezing through a tube. His stomach dropped when he felt pavement beneath his feet. He stopped and checked to make sure that all pertinent body parts had come with him. "That was

wicked.” Harry said to himself. “That was wicked, wasn’t it, Alden?” He asked the dog beside him. He reached down and petted the scruffy head. “Let’s go break the news to Aunt Petunia.” He told Alden as he started up the walk.

He opened the lock with a flick of the wrist and went inside. “Aunt Petunia?” He called out as he shut the door behind him. Harry heard a crash from the kitchen and the door flew open to reveal his aunt.

“Harry!” Harry nearly fell over as she pulled him into a hug. “We tried! We tried so hard! I didn’t want to abandon you there, and I would have gone there if I could.” Harry was surprised when he heard his aunt start crying.

“I’m okay, Aunt Petunia.” Harry said as he wrapped his arms around her. “I’m okay. I’m not hurt. I’m fine.” He held her and looked up as Remus came out of the kitchen. “Hey, Remus.” Harry said to the werewolf. “Give us a second...I think she’s a little upset.” The werewolf gave him an amused look and raised an eyebrow at Alden. Harry mouthed the word ‘later’ to him and held his aunt. She continued babbling about how much they had tried.

“It’s okay.” He told her. “I know you tried. I know you were doing everything you could to get me out of there.” Harry looked up from her face to see his two solicitors and nodded to them. He wondered how much he had paid them to work on that case...until he remembered how much money he actually had.

“I’m so glad you’re not hurt! I was so worried about you!” Petunia practically wailed. Harry felt a warmth growing in his stomach, and he smiled. His aunt really did care for him. He reached out with his magic and soothed her emotions just the slightest bit. Hysteria did nothing for his aunt. She cried for a few more minutes before calming enough to look at Harry. “Welcome home, Harry.” She said as she reached up to hold his face. Harry smiled and covered her hands with his own.

“Thank you, Aunt Petunia. I’m happy to be home.” Harry said. Alden barked, and he cringed. Aunt Petunia hated animals.

“What’s that?” She asked as she moved to look at the dog.

“His name is Alden. He’s my familiar.” Harry told her. “I didn’t have a choice in the matter.” He said in explanation.

“Is he housebroken?” she asked.

“Yes.” Harry said. “I’ll take care of him. You won’t have to do a thing for him, I promise.” He wanted to keep Alden if at all possible. He didn’t think his aunt would make him get rid of him...would she? “Can he stay?” He asked.

“As long as you accept responsibility for him.” Petunia said before pulling Harry to her in a hug. Harry smiled and allowed his aunt to hold him. He would allow her to enjoy ‘small’ Harry now. Starting tomorrow, he was going to grow a little each day until he was at his true height. He was tired of being short. This was nice, though. He liked this. He lowered his head to rest on his aunt’s shoulder and smiled to himself. It was good to be home. He nearly fell when his aunt jumped. “You must be starving!” She said with horror in her voice. “Who knows what they were feeding you at that place!” Petunia pulled Harry into the kitchen and made him sit down in the chair closest to her. She bustled about getting dinner ready for the table. Kreacher appeared and started helping her.

Harry only smiled and turned to consider the kitchen table. It looked like a Hermione study session on law and custody was taking place. “Wow.” He said, looking at all the books.

“Useless, the lot of them.” He heard from the doorway. He smiled up at Cynthia Bell, the Potters’ solicitor. She was very straight forward about her opinions, and the books didn’t impress her. “Thank goodness you’re home.” She said. “Now we can quit worrying about that guardianship...unless it’s not broken?”

“Shattered.” Harry told her with a smile. “Dumbledore will never be able to do anything like that again.” Harry told her.

“Good.” Ms. Bell waved her wand and most of the books disappeared into a satchel. “Would you care to press charges against him?” She asked. “You’re within your rights to do so.”

“No.” Harry saw Remus’s disapproval and smiled. “We’re at war. I don’t want to divide the resistance any more than it already is. I know that if I were to press charges, people would divide over the issue. It’s over, and that’s all I really care about.”

“A very mature decision.” Ms. Bell said with a nod. “You’ve raised a fine boy, Mrs. Dursley. I have to get back to the office. You know how to contact me if you need me, Mr. Potter. Try not to get into any more life or freedom threatening situations, if you please.” She told him a little sternly.

“I keep saying that they find me.” He said with a shrug. “I’ll try.” He promised.

“Do that. Take care, everyone.” She left the house then, and Harry felt her Apparate a few minutes later.

“Remus, I want you to call a security company, if you would. I want this house so heavily warded the Minister of Magic wouldn’t be able to get through.” Harry said the instant the lawyer left. “I want a wizard on duty here twenty-four hours a day.”

“Are you sure that’s necessary?” Petunia asked as she started setting the table. “Remus, books off the table.” She told the man. Remus waved his wand, and the books disappeared.

“I upset Dumbledore greatly.” Harry told her. “So much so that I’m afraid of what he might try to do.” Harry said in explanation. “I don’t want to take any chances. I feel like he sees me as a weapon, one he must control.” Harry massaged his forehead. “I just want to know that you’ll be safe here.” Harry said. “I won’t always be at home, and I don’t want to worry that Dumbledore will appear and try to take you away from me.” Harry had to wonder if all women cried at hearing their male relatives express worry over their well-being. Petunia cried and hugged him for a few minutes before pulling away.

“No problem, Harry. I know of several good companies. James’ grandfather used one to ward one of the houses, and the wards are still strong today. I’ll get in touch with them and see what they can do.” Remus opened a little notepad on the table, only to snatch it back when Petunia lowered a plate of food in front of him.

“My favorite!” Harry said happily.

“I started on it when Kreacher promised me that you were coming home.” Petunia said. “I know how much you like Shepherd’s pie.”

“Followed closely by pizza and spaghetti and meatballs.” Harry informed his aunt.

“I’m sure you like vegetables as well.” She said in a warning tone.

“Of course.” Harry agreed. Anything to keep pizza from being banned in the house. That would make things very difficult.

“Harry, we should set up a few things.” Remus said as he brought out his notepad again. “Your education, for one thing. The press. Things like that.” Remus told him.

“Can we do it after dinner?” Harry asked. “I just want to spend some time with you guys tonight.” Harry said.

“Certainly.” Remus put his pad away. “Though, if the two of you will excuse me, I have some phone calls to make. Something about you coming home safe and sound so Sensei can cancel his invasion plans.” Remus said as he left the kitchen.

“Was he serious?” Harry asked in shock.

“I think so.” Petunia said. She smiled at Harry and reached out to mess up his hair. “Eat up.” Petunia told him. “You’re too thin.” She gave him a look that meant business. Harry smiled and picked up his

fork. He'd let her boss him around for now. Okay, he'd let her boss him around whenever she wanted. He'd missed home.

Author's Note: There you go. Now, I expect no death threats until after the Christmas holidays. Do you have that? Nothing until after the Christmas holidays. Oh, I also need to speak with someone from England. Just message me or leave a review, please. I have some questions that the Internet doesn't seem to be able to answer. Thanks!

Author's Note: I'm baaaack! Hello! Here's the long awaited Chapter 55! Woot! Sorry it took so long. I know some of you looked at my bio to see what was going on. Thanks to everyone for their well-wishes for my speedy recovery.

“Deshi!” Harry jerked awake at hearing his defense teacher snapping his nickname. He fumbled for his glasses, misjudged the amount of bed he had left, and toppled to the floor. “Call him off!”

Call who off? Harry wondered blearily as he pushed himself up off the floor. He raised his head and stared at the sight before him. Sensei Leonard was dangling from Khalid Haven’s hands. Dangling. “Khalid, put him down,” Harry rasped as his eyes adjusted to the pre-dawn light. “Now.”

“Spoil my fun,” Khalid pouted as he lowered the other man to the ground. “You know him, yes?”

“Yes, I know him,” Harry snapped, his annoyance at being awake this early coming through. “Let me make introductions so no one ends up a snack.” Harry stood up. Too early for this diplomatic stuff... “Is Paul here, too?” Harry moved towards the door.

“Downstairs,” Sensei told him. Sensei turned and eyed the vampire with no amount of trust in his eyes. “You know this?” He asked.

“Yes,” Harry opened his door and started down the stairs. “Try not to harm each other while I’m gone.” Harry stumbled into the hallway and down the stairs. The security guard nodded to him from his chair and Harry grunted in response.

Remus had found the guards yesterday and a few had come over right away for Harry to interview. He had chosen four different wizards whom each held a six hour shift in his aunt’s home. The first day had been spent showing the wizards how life worked in his house. After that, they sort of melted into the background. He hadn’t counted on Khalid appearing.

(Flashback)

Harry sat up in bed. Something had just entered his room. "Calm, little one." The smooth tones of Khalid's voice met Harry's ears.

"Khalid?" Harry asked, locating his glasses and pulling them on. He squinted through the darkness and spelled on his lamp. "What are you doing here?" He asked.

"Protecting you." Khalid answered as he perched on the top of Harry's bookshelf. "I wanted to make sure that you were alright. That, and I have become bored with Hogwarts. I would like to stay with my little Magus for a while. There seems to be entertainment around you." Khalid explained.

"Am I in danger that I don't know about yet?" Harry asked as he ran his hand through his hair. He hated having to wake up and think right away. It wasn't fair.

"No." Khalid said shortly. "You should just go back to sleep. I can stop any wizard that comes this way."

"Unless they shoot sunlight at you." Harry told the vampire.

"That is what sun block is for." Khalid said as he stood and walked up to the bed. "You worry too much." Khalid stood and looked down at Harry. "You're getting worry lines." He said, drawing one finger down over Harry's forehead. Harry's eyes crossed for a moment to stare at the finger in front of him. It passed at an angle that had him looking up past the hand in front of him and into Khalid's eyes.

Khalid smirked as the boy fell backwards into bed. He gathered up the disturbed blanket and tucked in the child, humming a song forgotten by most of humanity as he did so. He smoothed the wild hair down and smiled. They always looked so innocent while they were asleep! He moved back to the desk and settled on the edge. He pulled a book from his cloak and began reading.

Harry had no idea what Khalid had meant by "entertainment", but he was willing to put up with the vampire so long as it added another layer of protection to the home. Khalid had promised not to snack on either Harry's aunt or bodyguards, so Harry figured it was okay.

He heard voices coming from the kitchen. He bumped into the wall (ignoring the guard's snort from behind him) and walked into the room. "Paul," Harry said to the man nursing a cup of tea. "I need you to come meet someone upstairs so I can go back to sleep."

"Sorry, kiddo, but that didn't make much sense," Paul said as he stood up. He wrapped an arm around Harry and gave Harry a hug. "Good to see you, Harry. You're up early."

"M not supposed to be," Harry whined. "Stupid vampire."

"What?" Paul asked.

Harry latched onto Paul's arm and started dragging him towards the stairs. "You'll meet him, then he'll leave me in peace so I can sleep." Harry was muttering to himself as the pair went up the stairs. "I just want sleep."

"You're still not making sense," Paul warned Harry as they finished the stairs and went down the hallway to his room.

Harry opened the door to his room and saw Khalid and Sensei glaring at each other. "Khalid, this is Dr. Paul Lauter, my therapist, trusted friend, sometimes bodyguard. I trust him with my life. This man," he motioned to Sensei, "is my martial arts and defense teacher, Sensei Leonard Ricer. Both men have acted as my bodyguards more than once and I trust them with my life. Paul, Sensei, meet Khalid Haven, a vampire I met while I was imprisoned at Hogwarts and can't get rid of. I trust him." He sank onto his bed and burrowed into the covers. "Everyone's introduced. Now let me sleep."

The three men watched as Harry dropped off in a matter of seconds. "Well, I believe the lad wants to sleep, as they often do at that age," Khalid said softly. "Leave him to his slumber." Khalid motioned the two men towards the door.

"You, too." Sensei said as he entered the hallway.

"I am his night guard. He'll see you after dawn." Khalid shut the door and returned to guarding Harry while the boy slept. He knew that the boy was safe; there were guards downstairs and that aunt of his wouldn't let anything through if she could help it. He just felt better watching the boy sleep.

Harry rolled over and sighed as his eyes registered sunlight coming in through his window. He pulled on his glasses and saw a note resting beneath them. He picked it up and studied it.

Until sunset, my little magus. Your friends are downstairs. KH

Harry's brow furrowed as he tried to think of what Khalid meant by "friends". He jumped out of bed in the next instant. Paul and Sensei were here!

Harry nearly tripped over Alden in his haste to remove himself from bed. The dog only looked up, gave Harry a glare and returned to his boneless position on the floor. "Sure, don't move at all." Harry told the dog as he left his bedroom for the bathroom. "I'll even serve you breakfast in bed, if you like." He joked to the animal. "Just come downstairs when you're ready." Alden thumped his tail once and went back to sleep. Huh. Some creatures had all the luck.

He took a quick shower to wake himself up and found clothing that mostly matched in record time. He was still pulling on shoes when he hit the stairwell and managed not to break his neck as he hopped down the first few steps. He ignored the guard snorting in the corner by the door and made it to the kitchen. He smelled breakfast.

"Morning!" Harry said as he entered the room. A chorus of good mornings came from the people gathered there. Paul, Sensei, Remus, and Petunia were all seated at the kitchen table with notes of some kind spread before them. "Breakfast?" He asked, knowing his nose hadn't lied to him.

"In the oven." Petunia said in response. "Help yourself."

"Did you eat?" He asked as he got out a plate for himself.

“Sometime around dawn,” Remus said. “After your little scene with the vampire and you grumbling it was too early for diplomacy.”

“I said that aloud?” Harry asked as he helped himself to waffles and sausage.

“That and a great many other things,” Sensei grunted from his chair. “I did not hear foul language.”

Harry wasn't sure if that was a warning or not. He poured syrup over his plate and went to the kitchen table to eat. “What are you doing?” He asked as he made space for his plate amid all the notes.

“Planning your therapy, education, and training.” Petunia said calmly.

“Okay.” Harry left the adults to it and paid attention to more pressing matters...like his stomach. “I can still be in the play, right?” He asked.

“That was number two on our list.” Paul told him.

“What was number one?” Harry's curiosity asked.

“Therapy,” Paul flipped a page of his notes. “We've pretty much figured out how this is going to work.” Paul looked up at Harry demolishing his way through his breakfast. “You'll return to St. Jude's for now. You'll spend your usual class time with your classmates. You'll have therapy with me four times a week. I think you're ready to cut back a bit, but that doesn't mean I won't expect the same amount of effort out of you.”

“Okay.” Harry said happily as he sipped his orange juice. He felt the room go silent around him and he looked up. “What?” He asked, smearing his last sausage through the syrup.

“You're okay with us planning everything without you?” Petunia asked with a worried look.

“I know you four have my...what’s that phrase you always use? ‘Best interests’? I know you have my best interests in mind whenever you plan stuff for me. I also know that you aren’t unreasonable and if I have any major objections that we can change things, right?” He stood up from the table and took his plate and glass to the sink. “I’m okay with this, guys.” Harry smiled at the four adults and went back to the table. “How often am I going to be training with Sensei?” He asked, pulling the timetable towards him. “Remus? How often will you be coming by?”

“Uh, you’ll be with Sensei every morning before your first class and Remus comes by on Saturday evenings to take care of business matters.” Paul said as he checked his notes. “Sound okay?”

“Perfect.” Harry said with a smile. He jumped when he heard rough howl coming from upstairs. Alden. He left the table and took the stairs two at a time. A quick glance in his bedroom told him that Alden had moved. “Alden?” he called out. He heard some snuffling coming from the bathroom and pushed the door open. A harassed-looking Alden was in the bathtub, covered in suds. Kreacher stood next to the tub, looking very pleased with himself as he scrubbed at the dog’s fur. “Kreacher? What’s going on?” Harry asked.

“Harry Potter, sir!” Attempts to get the elf calling him “Harry” were futile. “Nasty doggie needed a bath. He smelled too much like the woods. Kreacher makes the doggie smell nice and fresh.” Harry tried not to laugh, but he couldn’t stop a few chuckles.

“Alright, just make sure you dry him well, okay?” Harry asked the elf with a smile. “And ask next time before you start?”

“Yes, Harry Potter, sir.” Kreacher snapped off a quick bow before turning back to his work.

Alden glared at Harry with all of his doggy hatred. Harry could only smile. “He’s right, you know.” Harry told the dog. “You are smelling pretty funky.” The glare increased in strength and promised no rounds of fetch for the foreseeable future. Harry left his familiar and

house elf to battle it out. Kreacher did have a good idea; Alden probably hadn't had a bath since he came into existence in his plane...wait, did that even make sense? Harry pushed the thought from his head and tried to ignore the unease that idea brought to him. Harry pushed away the reports Remus had brought for him to look over and sighed. It was late; his aunt had gone to bed about three hours ago and he had told Khalid to take a walk for a while since he wasn't ready to go to sleep yet. He decided to see what Hermione was up to at Hogwarts. He was pleasantly surprised to see a message from her.

Oh, Harry! You wouldn't believe what is going on here! People are just going mad! It's brilliant! Everything started just after you Apparated through the wards! How did you do that? I demand an answer.

Dumbledore just stood there, looking completely lost and like he didn't know anyone around him. McGonagall finally took over, ordering everyone to go back to the common rooms. We did, of course. No one messes with her when she gets that look. You know the one I mean...that don't mess with me look. She can be downright scary when she wants to be.

Well, the next morning at breakfast, she takes Dumbledore's chair...that was enough to scare some of the first years – they thought he died – like Voldemort could be that lucky! She announces that Dumbledore has taken a leave of absence due to his “declining health”. We both know the real reason, don't we, Harry?

I finally figured out what happened to him. He's confined to a private room in the Hospital Wing with wards on the door to keep him there. Something about his age catching up to him. I only heard about that by accident while I was visiting Drake down in Professor Snape's rooms. I don't think anyone else knows I know.

McGonagall's doing an admirable job, Harry. She's re-instated the DA...and told Mad-Eye to quit complaining about your disappearance. She snapped at him and said it obvious that you didn't feel safe here and she wouldn't hold your disappearance against you. She has

started a nightly patrol of teachers...and they catch students with an ease that is uncanny...not that I'm speaking from experience...

Fudge has been here a lot, getting advice from McGonagall about things now. She's become the unofficial head of the old crowd now, and while the Ministry loathes the idea that the old crowd exists, they do use its resources often enough. Mostly the Order's new spy, whoever he is. Or she.

Ron's back to his old self. He'll defend you and your actions to his last breath although he still has moments of stupidity. ("Hermione, you wouldn't understand...it's an Auror thing.") Never mind that I taught him half of the spells he uses for the stupid Auror program. I know that sounds terribly petty of me, Harry, but I didn't realize how immature he could be. Has he always been this way?

You know that vampire Professor Zareh had here for a while? He disappeared around the same time as you. The professor says he comes and goes like that, but I have a feeling Zareh is worried, as though he isn't sure whether the disappearance is a good or bad thing yet.

Hogwarts itself is strong. Many of the students don't understand what happened. They couldn't hear what you said to Dumbledore and most likely don't want to know. A few first years were pulled out of school by superstitious parents. Don't take this the wrong way, but they think that Hogwarts is no longer safe because you left. Not because Dumbledore is gone. I get asked a lot of questions about you, where you are, why you left. I answer truthfully: Harry made his decision without any consultation or information on my part.

Why won't you press charges, Harry? Dumbledore almost killed you! I would have had him tossed in jail and left him to rot. He should have known what he was doing. Your life is already in enough danger from Voldemort. Why couldn't you prosecute the person who was supposed to be protecting you? I don't understand your reasoning, mostly because I HAVEN'T HEARD IT! I'm expecting an answer justifying your decision, and it had better be logical. P and Q and all that.

That's all for now. I'm looking forward to hearing your explanation (and it had better be a good one).

Love,

Hermione

Harry sat for a few minutes before reaching for a pen to answer Hermione. He knew that she would need the explanation, but there were a few things he couldn't tell her. He could only hope that she would forgive him when she found out about his plans later. After all, being the Dark Lord's student gave him a new set of skills.

Harry rolled off his bed and covered his head with his hands. His entire body tensed in preparation for his uncle's blows. They never came. He lay on the floor and shuddered as his dream caught up with his mind. He slowly uncoiled and prayed that Khalid was out. He didn't want the vampire to see him like this; the man would turn motherly on him and smother him with attention. It was disturbing during the times Harry only wanted to empty his stomach and beg for someone to Oblivate him. It was times like this that Harry hated Bleys.

Bleys had asked him about the holes in his memories. Harry hadn't believed him. Why in the world would he have holes in his memories? He had responded with a very teenage-like comment that Bleys obviously had holes in his own mind if he thought Harry's memories were incomplete. It had been the wrong thing to say. Bleys had lashed out and pinned Harry to his chair with magic even Harry couldn't fight off. Something had forced Harry's head up and his eyes open. Harry had stared into Bley's dark eyes for only a few seconds before his mind felt like there were fingernails shredding through it. He had panicked then, trying to fight the presence tearing his mind apart, pushing against the magic that was holding him down. His eyes had rolled back in his head as the nails withdrew and he had happily fallen into unconsciousness.

He had come to just as Bleys arranged a blanket over him. Harry was lying on the couch with his head in Bleys's lap. The man had smiled down at him and carded a hand through Harry's hair. "I'm sorry, child. You didn't deserve to have holes in your memory, no matter how bad

they are.” Bleys hadn’t sounded sorry at all. Harry always forgot who he was dealing with when Bleys did things like this; Bleys’s ethics were far different from the wizarding world’s today. Cruciatus Curse? Nothing. Blade through his hand? No worries. Restoration of memories that were better off forgotten? For the best.

Harry’s head had started throbbing as his mind tried to absorb all of the memories Bleys had forced on him. Stupid skewed ethics of ancient wizards! A vial had appeared at his lips and he drank the potion eagerly. The potion had taken effect quickly and Harry allowed himself to drift in the drugged haze. He was aware that his mind was in turmoil, but he just hadn’t cared.

Harry shuddered and pulled his fraying nerves together as he pushed himself off the floor and stood. He removed his blanket from his bed and wrapped it around himself for warmth. He knew he wasn’t going to get to sleep anytime soon. Tea. Tea sounded great. He padded down the hallway and stairs, nodding to the guard when the man had nodded to him. The kitchen was welcoming in the glare of the electric lights. He filled the kettle and put it on the stove, completely forgetting the fact that he had magic.

He had just settled on a chair in the living room with his cup of tea when he heard a light foot on the stairs. He looked up as Aunt Petunia entered the living room. “Harry? What’s wrong?”

“Just a nightmare, Aunt Petunia,” Harry told her calmly as he hugged his tea in his hands. “Just a dream.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked, settling next to him on the armrest of the chair. One of her hands reached out and started stroking his hair. Oh, that felt nice. He liked that. His head went back and rested against the back of the chair as he closed his eyes.

“Do you remember when I was in that coma thing and worried you all?” Harry asked calmly.

“Mm-hmm.” Petunia answered. Her hand didn’t stray from its path through Harry’s hair. That felt wonderful.

“This is kind of hard to believe, so bear with me.” He said, relaxing further into the chair. Oh, he could fall asleep like this. “While I was in a coma, I went somewhere else. A magical dimension, I guess I could call it.” He paused to see if Petunia had any questions. No questions came and he continued on. “There was someone there; he taught Merlin, you know.” Harry’s hands lowered to his lap. Petunia reached out and took the tea from him and set it on the side table. “Well, this man, Bleys, taught me how to control my magic and use it without a wand.”

“Really?” Petunia asked in a soft voice.

“Yeah.” Harry held up a hand and blue flames covered it. “It doesn’t hurt, Aunt Petunia.” He told her. “Just tickles.”

“Okay.” Petunia went back to carding his hair and Harry smiled.

“Paul had said that I had repressed memories. You know what those are?” He asked. Petunia said yes and he continued his story. “Bleys said I had holes in my memories...I guess those were the repressed memories. Bleys gave them back to me somehow.” Harry paused for a moment before continuing. “I wish he hadn’t.”

“What is in these memories, Harry?” Petunia asked. Harry shook his head and just wanted to feel his hair being played with and have the safe feeling he had missed come back to him. “Try?”

Harry frowned. He knew that he and Petunia had to communicate. Paul and Joe had said that often enough when it came to family therapy. This just felt wrong to do. He took a deep breath and attempted to gather his thoughts. “A few memories were of Dumbledore. Discussions he and I had had after a few events that nearly took my life at school.” He paused, trying to gather his thoughts. “I knew about things that I wasn’t supposed to know about...or so Dumbledore thought. Things Voldemort told me that had ended up being true that Dumbledore didn’t want me to know, mostly spells that he didn’t want me using...though some information was

there as well.” He fiddled with the blanket covering him and tried to stay calm. “The rest of the memories were about here.”

He was having a hard time stopping now that he had started. “Remember when I told you that Uncle Vernon had hurt me once or twice?” He asked hesitantly. He wasn’t sure how Aunt Petunia would take it.

“Did he hurt you more than that?” She asked calmly. Wow, his aunt hadn’t decided to kill him. That was good.

“Yeah,” Harry answered. “Whenever you went out with Dudley.”

“Every time?” She asked in shock.

“Just about,” Harry answered truthfully. “He...tried to hurt me. Hurt me so I wouldn’t heal.” Harry waited to feel his aunt’s retribution that said she didn’t believe him, that she was going back to Uncle Vernon and away from dishonest boys who didn’t deserve her attention. She didn’t.

“Tell me?” She said in a quivering voice. “Tell me what he did to you?”

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at his aunt to study her. She looked like she wanted to know, no, needed to know. “It’s going to be hard.” Harry warned.

“I know. Just tell me what he did to you.” She told Harry. Harry raised his head and nearly groaned at the crick in his neck. A hand carded through his hair and Harry smiled at the sensation. “Good morning, Aunt Petunia.” He said, his voice a little thick from crying earlier.

“Good morning, dear.” She said with a smile. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah.” He told her. He had slept well.

“Good. Now, go and get ready for the day. Remus is coming over for a while.” Petunia nudged him off the couch where the two had finally settled after Harry’s revelations. He had cried himself to sleep and his aunt had held him just like Harry had always wished she would when he was little.

Harry smiled at her and made his way upstairs. Maybe he could convince his aunt that pizza was in order. And ice cream of the mint chocolate chip variety.

Harry was backstage at St. Jude’s, fiddling with the cape that the costume crew swore he had to wear to get into the part. He rolled his eyes to himself and smiled when he thought of the reception that he had received upon appearing in the dining hall for lunch. Allen had run up to him, dropped to his knees, and begged Harry to take the part of “Dracula”. Allen then proceeded to make a fool of himself by hugging Harry’s knees when Harry said that he would take the part, so long as Bevie said it was okay.

Bevie had no problem with it. In fact, he had muttered something along the lines of “Thank God” when Harry said he was still interested in the part. It seemed that Allen hadn’t warmed to the part at all after Harry had disappeared and had felt like he was betraying his friend by taking his part.

Explaining his disappearance was a little difficult. His friends didn’t remember much from that night. Bug said that there were a lot of people and he had noticed that his friend had just disappeared at one point. He had assumed that Sensei had snagged Harry and taken him away from the mob, but Sensei’s actions later had proved him wrong. They had been worried when told that Evan had disappeared and then later turned up, unharmed and no worse for the wear. Harry had given his friends a carefully edited story about the man trying to kill him and how he had spent a few days dodging the now crazy man who thought he owed Harry a home since he had killed Harry’s parents. All of his friends had expressed their horror and promised to keep an eye out for suspicious characters, even with the bodyguard following Harry around.

Petunia had insisted that Harry take his own team of bodyguards to St. Jude’s, just to be safe. Paul had smoothed everything over with

school officials and they were allowed to accompany Harry everywhere but the bathroom and therapy. It was a little maddening, but his friends thought it was brilliant and kept asking to see the bodyguards' guns. The guards refused, of course. They only had wands, but dressed as Muggles while working at St. Jude's.

Harry had appealed to Remus in getting the guards removed. That didn't work at all the way he had hoped; Remus had threatened to increase the guards. Harry didn't mind the guards, not really. It was becoming extremely difficult to continue disappearing whenever the Dark Lord called him. Harry had explained the situation to Voldemort. The evil wizard remarkably understood after he had lashed Harry a bit. He then demanded that Harry continue appearing whenever Voldemort wished and would do so promptly. Harry had a feeling that he would be pulling some fast ones to guarantee that he could continue his lessons with Voldemort. He only hoped that the guards would forgive him for slipping through their defenses.

Harry heard his cue coming up and he wrapped the cloak around him as he stepped forward. He made it to his first mark. "I am...Dracula."

Author's Note 2: Okay, so not as long as my usual chapter...but I'm already working on the next one! I swear! It should be out a lot quicker than this one was. Also, if there are any native German speakers (or German language professors) who are really good at grammar reading this...could you please contact me? I'm not doing well in my classes...I need a bit of help with grammar. (says the English major!) Thanks in advance!

Author's Note: And you all thought I was dead! Nope, I had schoolwork. Lots of schoolwork. It's all over now. I had my last final yesterday. It wasn't pretty, and I'm sure some blood was left behind on that paper. I decided to celebrate by posting!

ATTENTION: The rating is now set at “MATURE”. If you do not fit into that category, please find something else to read. I am not responsible for extremely young readers becoming disturbed. Are we understood? Yes? Good. On to the chapter!

[illegible]

Mi,

Everyone keeps asking me why I won't press charges. I can't. I've realized that it's not "all about me". The way I see things, as they stand now, is that there are two factions in the wizarding world, those for Voldemort and those against Voldemort.

Those for Voldemort have been increasing in strength, regardless of the fact that more were captured and put away in Azkaban. More are joining everyday. Voldemort is gaining followers faster than the Light side. He draws them in, promises them glory and peace under his regime, and then entraps them with their own idealism.

Yes, Voldemort is an insane evil Dark Lord that needs to be put down as soon as possible, but he has something the Light side doesn't have: he has an excellent story to tell to those he attracts. I didn't spend all of my visions watching him torture people, Mi. He is a phenomenal speaker. He gathers those whom are outcasts in standard magical society. Yes, he has the pureblood faction, but aren't they outcasts just as much as werewolves or vampires? They're looked upon as old-fashioned, a shell of the outdated society of the wizarding world. If you were raised to think that your family name meant something, wouldn't you be upset as well? Werewolves, vampires, the abused, the old-fashioned, the neglected. There is great potential for such power if they were all banded together under one story, and Mi, Voldemort's is that story. Why would any of those groups hold any love for a Ministry that persecutes those outcasts

and their beliefs? I'm not going to start spouting blood purity here, but I can see their side of the argument.

The Light side needs all the help it can get. There are two figureheads at this point in time. They are Dumbledore, the Defeater of Grindelwald and Lover of Fine Socks, and, much as I am chagrined to admit it, me. The Ministry doesn't even come into it. It is collapsing around the heads of our government without anyone realizing it. All of this writing now brings me to my conclusion.

If I were to press charges of kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, child endangerment, attempted murder, etc. (my legal team made a list...you'd like them), I would only fracture the Light side beyond all hope of recovery.

Does it hurt that Dumbledore has betrayed my trust? Yes. Should he leave me alone? Yes. Am I afraid that he'll try something similar? A little. Do I agree with what he did? Absolutely not. As much as I would love to see him brought to trial and left to rot in whatever punishment the justice system could deal out for someone so misguided, I can't. I can not in good conscience shatter what little resistance against Voldemort there is, even if it means that my own wish for justice must be put aside. I can not fight a two-front war. My goal is to defeat the Dark Lord. I must focus on that. I hope you understand my reasoning, Mi.

Your brother,

Skywalker

[illegible]

“I keep telling myself that it doesn’t matter,” Harry told Paul as he lowered his feet to the floor from his “ball” position. “That he can’t hurt me anymore and that I shouldn’t worry about it.” Harry paused and drummed his fingers on the armrest of the couch and then brought his legs up to sit cross legged. “The fact is that I can’t stop thinking that he’s around the corner, and he’s going to drag me to the hallway and toss me back in that damned cupboard.”

Paul sat and considered what Harry had said for a few minutes. There were very few people Paul wanted to strangle in his life. In fact, he could count them all off on one hand: all of them were related to Harry in some way. First, there was Voldemort, for depriving Harry of his parents and turning this normal child into a figure head for the dreadfully sheep-like wizarding world. Second was Dumbledore for daring to place Harry with a family that wouldn't be able to support Harry in such a position. Third was Vernon Dursley for daring to lay a finger on this child with the intention of hurting him. Fourth was for the person who had used magic to suppress the memories, whoever he was. Fifth was this Bley's character. If Paul ever got his hands on him for just releasing Harry's memories in that way without regard for Harry's mental well-being...well, Paul had never been violent, but he would cheerfully remove every single bone from each of the men's bodies without a qualm for either the mess he made or the fact that he removed life from their bodies.

He and Harry had discussed the memories and repression for the first few sessions they had after Harry had returned to St. Jude's. The pattern was disturbing. Any memory that told Harry he had something to fear from Vernon Dursly was removed, as well as memories of things that had happened at Hogwarts. Harry's experiences with Voldemort were much more extensive than either could have guessed.

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Harry sighed and lowered his head to his hands. His new memories were confusing him. His first year encounter with Voldemort had included a longer talk with Quirrell about the Dark Arts, how they could both entrap a person in their strength and release a person from past pain by using that pain in their rituals. Harry had responded to that idea, wanting to forget some pain that he knew he had had from the Dursleys, but couldn't explain how he knew something he didn't know. It was Voldemort who had interrupted with the idea of memory charms and how to disarm them. Harry had known then who had hurt him at home. Quirrell had promised to help him not to have to return to the Dursleys...then, something had happened. Harry wasn't sure what it was, even to this day. It was as though the scene had been reset and Harry found himself confronting Voldemort. It

didn't make sense. Quirrell had promised to help him; Harry had accepted that help. What else was supposed to have happened? Obviously, not what had happened. Voldemort hadn't ever referred to this incident during his and Harry's talk.

Second year was different, too. Harry had spent more time with Tom Riddle in the Chamber of Secrets. Their conversation had been different. Tom Riddle had learned more about Harry through Ginny, yes, but he had read through the lines of what Ginny wrote. He had known that Harry was abused (bars on the window gave it away) and had told Harry that it could stop if Harry complained to anyone but Dumbledore. Even a teacher Harry hated would have stepped in and taken Harry out of an abusive home, even if Harry had no proof that he was being abused.

There were other things, too. Memories of Vernon and his abuse, things he had thought he had seen at Hogwarts, but had dismissed as his imagination at the time. Everything had changed with Bleys's return of his memories. He wasn't sure that he liked it. No, he didn't like it. He hated it.

[illegible]

“It’s okay to feel this way, Harry.” Paul told him, wondering what he could say to take away the fear that Harry was showing. “It’s normal.”

“Good,” Harry said with a smile. “I like being normal.”

“Just remember that Vernon cannot hurt you here. He’s not allowed to be here or at your aunt’s home without her there. He cannot touch you again.” Paul told him.

“I know that here,” Harry answered as he reached up to tap his head. “Remembering that when something surprises me, well, let’s just say I don’t.” Harry told his therapist.

“It’ll take some time, but it can be done,” Paul told him as he closed his notebook and laid it on the desk. “Just remember to keep up on your journaling and breathing exercises. We’ll continue talking about

drew back from the object, loathing it with an intensity that he didn't know could exist in his body. A quick movement of his flung a table at the man holding the cross. The cross was dropped and he advanced again, tossing one of the men across the room. He grasped the man in front of him and lifted him by the lapels of his coat. The man's eyes grew wide in fear and his hands scrabbled at the person holding him.

Bright light hit Harry in the face, and he dropped the man he was holding to hide his eyes. He howled in pain and slunk backwards into the darkness. Everything hurt and he felt his power start to diminish. Why had that cursed man done that?

"Now!" he looked up as the two men advanced upon him with a stake and hammer. He backed away, tracking each of their movements. He just needed to get to his coffin, and he would be fine. He just needed to lay in his earth, and then he would be able to fight them again, to beat them away from him.

He lowered the lid of the coffin and felt some of his power returning. The lid flew off, and he hissed in pain as sunlight hit him full in the face. A mirror! He loathed mirrors. How dare they bring a mirror into his home?

His hands shot out to deal with them. He drew them back to himself when they started to burn. Holy water! He hissed again and jumped up from his coffin. The stake caught him full in the heart, and he grabbed it with one hand. He stumbled backwards into his coffin and looked up at the two men who had broken his power so completely. One hand crept up to hold the coffin, his fingernails digging into the wood. One of them grasped hold of the stake and thrust it in further. Harry's body jerked and then lay still. His hand dropped back into the coffin and he was dead.

He heard the two men speak to each other for a few minutes before moving away and out of the house. He raised one hand and clenched the side of the coffin. Had they honestly thought he would be so easy to defeat?

“Good! Excellent!” Bevie’s voice broke Harry out of character and he sat up in the coffin.

“Thanks, Bevie!” Harry said happily.

“Can we have Evan now, Bevie?” A girl asked as she came onto the stage. “We have his final costume ready and we want to make sure it fits and doesn’t need further adjustments.”

“Huh?” Bevie said, distracted by a clipboard. “Certainly, Susan. Evan, you did wonderfully. We have dress rehearsal tomorrow at 2:00 pm. Please make sure you’re here and don’t get hurt at those martial arts lessons of yours.”

“Sure thing, Bevie!” Harry said as he climbed out of the coffin and smiled to himself. He wondered if Bevie knew how creepy it was getting into and out of a real coffin.

Harry followed Susan backstage and smiled again. The entire costume crew was ready for him. He whipped the cloak around in front of his face and leered at the gathered girls. “Good evening, ladies.” He drawled in the accent Khalid had pounded into his brain. Almost the entire group giggled at him. Hmm, accents make girls giggle. I must remember that.

“Easy, Lord Dracula. You still have a costume to try on.” Michelle said, holding up a garment bag. “Go now, or no blood for you tonight!”

“As the lady commands,” Harry bowed over her hand and took the costume with the other. He turned her hand over and bared his fangs. Michelle snatched her hand back and smacked him behind the head. “Ow!”

“Go on, Lord Dracula,” she said with a smile. “We want to see how well we did.”

Harry smiled at the group in general and ducked behind the curtained off area and started to change clothes. He had just pulled his shirt off when Michelle’s head poked in. “I forgot to give you your shoes.” She

tombstones, hiding Harry's feet from the rest of the world. He felt a feral grin slip onto his face. He could practice his Dracula movements! Bevie had said that Harry was coming along fine with the performance just days away, but it never hurt to practice what Khalid had taught him about walking.

Harry slipped through the fog without a sound and left the dead behind for the decrepit manor house. No one questioned him in the halls, and he allowed himself to think of the house as Dracula's lair. He pulled the Death Eater robes around him as he would his Dracula cape and prepared his pureblood prince/blood prince air for any Death Eaters he might encounter.

Light and voices alerted him to the location of tonight's meeting. He paused just before entering and told himself that no one there could harm him with the types of wandless magic protections on him. He told himself he was being silly. No one would dare harm the Dark Lord's student and protégé. Harry had to smirk to himself. He would have never believed that he would become the Dark Lord's student or be grateful for that title.

He entered the room and stayed against the wall. Voldemort's more trusted servants, the Inner Circle, stayed to the left side of the room while the other Death Eaters were on the right. Harry slipped behind the Inner Circle and moved up to Voldemort's side. Voldemort was busy cursing a new Death Eater for failing at whatever impossible task Voldemort had assigned him. Death Eaters who survived the initiation as a Death Eater and managed to accomplish several impossible tasks could only hope to join the Inner Circle some day. Most of the Inner Circle became the Inner Circle because they shared the same level of madness as Voldemort himself.

Harry took his place next to Voldemort's throne and watched as Voldemort continued torturing someone on the floor below him. It appeared to be a Muggle of some sort. Harry twitched his fingers and he studied the man writhing under the Cruciatus Curse. He had brown hair, was slightly portly, and seemed to be toeing the line towards madness. He was becoming less coherent the longer Voldemort "played" with him. He listened to the Dark Lord's mutterings about filthy Muggles and that clenched it.

Harry closed his eyes behind his mask and stretched out his magic. He could feel the different layers surrounding the man and focused in on the layer of the Cruciatus Curse. He separated the Cruciatus layer from the man's nervous system. He then slithered in a mild Imperius curse to keep the man twitching and shaking as though the Cruciatus still affected him.

Harry played this game with the spells until Voldemort tired of it. He was happy for the practice. He had a feeling that he would need this skill sooner or later, preferably later, if he had his way. Voldemort suddenly turned and left the Muggle in spasms on the ground. He saw Harry standing next to his throne. Voldemort smirked at him and waved one hand at Harry. "Why don't you finish him off?" He asked Harry.

Harry felt blood drain from his face before he nodded slightly. He knew this would take a bit of fancy spell work for it to be believable. He stepped forward and took out his wand. The entire circle of Death Eaters tensed up and turned to watch him. It wasn't often that they saw Voldemort's student in action, but they were interested in him. They were far too interested in him for his comfort. The Death Eaters were very political and territorial; it was all about their power. Some of them had tried to befriend him while the others blatantly threatened him.

This man needed medical attention to recover from the Cruciatus Curse. He was already turning glassy eyed. Harry raised his wand and with his free hand quickly spread out his magic over the man. He brought his wand down with a mumbled word and the man disappeared. He knew the Muggle would appear in the Hogwarts Infirmary, setting off numerous alarms to alert Madame Pomfrey of a patient in need. They would find a note on the man that said "From Tom". He knew that few people would understand it, but those who knew of Voldemort's student would know who Tom was. The delivery of a Muggle would only confuse them more. He couldn't wait to hear from Hermione about the amazing appearing Muggle.

"Well done, my child," Voldemort said to Harry as he sat down. Harry nodded in acknowledgement and turned his attention back to

the Death Eaters. It was never a good idea to take his eyes off them for long. He had found one of them trying to curse him behind his back. Harry figured the man had a death wish; Voldemort had threatened their lives if any harm came to his student.

One Death Eater moved forward and dropped to his knee in front of Voldemort. "My Lord?"

Voldemort looked down at the man and frowned. "Yes?" he snapped.

"My Lord, the other Death Eaters and I are concerned about your student." The man began. Harry felt his shoulders tense up and his stomach flip over at the same time. Had one of them discovered that he really wasn't hurting anyone? Or that he didn't believe in anything the Dark Lord said?

"In what way?" Voldemort asked, raising his wand.

"We think he is a security risk," Oh, that was the wrong thing to say. Harry didn't believe it was possible, but Voldemort trusted Harry completely with his location. "We know nothing about him and –" Screams started as Voldemort used the Cruciatus Curse on him for a half minute. Harry watched without too much worry. Half a minute was nothing compared to the amount of time he had spent under the curse.

"Interesting, isn't it?" Voldemort said conversationally. "My student, the person with whom I share all my secrets, is thought to be a security risk." Voldemort shot Harry an amused look. Harry snorted from behind his mask. "How would you like to take care of this doubter, my child?" Voldemort asked.

Harry knew what he was to the Death Eaters. He was an unknown. He imagined he must look menacing without having revealed his face once. In fact, the only people who knew what he looked like was Voldemort and Zareh, and Zareh had seen only illusion. Fear of the unknown gives that fear amazing power. Harry had read that in a book once and he felt that it was true.

He drew himself up and stalked forward, much in the manner of Dracula. He stopped a few feet from the Death Eater. He stared down at him and noticed that the eyes behind the mask were terrified. No real damage, but extreme fright. Harry thought to himself as he raised his wand. "I find your lack of faith disturbing," Harry quoted before mumbling a word and tightening his magic around the man's throat.

He could feel the Death Eaters draw back as one away from him and the man. He watched as the man's hands reached up to his throat as he choked. His mask fell off as he fought for his air. "Enough, child." Voldemort said from behind him. "Release him."

"As you wish," Harry really hoped that no Death Eaters had seen Star Wars. He flicked his wand and moved back to his place. He heard great gasps of air being taken from the man.

"All of you should consider this a warning. My student is not as lenient as you would think. He has my permission to deal with you as he sees fit." Voldemort announced.

I do? That's news to me. Harry decided to look menacing as though he had not yet punished anyone for his own interests. Harry felt a shudder of fear go through the group. These people want to change the wizarding world for the better? They're pathetic. They don't have the courage to face problems head on.

"Child, your instructor is waiting." Voldemort told him. Harry nodded to him and left the crowd of Death Eaters behind. His shoes clicked on the polished floors of the slowly restoring manor house. Harry wasn't sure how Voldemort was managing it, but the Riddle manor house was slowly being restored to what Harry supposed was its former glory. An army of house elves or some serious spell work. Harry pondered. The door to his classroom was open and he walked in as he took off his mask and lowered his hood. A dueling area was set up inside the room, which only confirmed to Harry that someone had expanded this room to be bigger inside than outside.

"Good evening, Tom." Zareh said as he stepped away from the dueling platform.

“Good evening, William.” Harry returned in his accented voice. “What are we doing?”

“You have eyes,” Zareh teased.

“Dueling, yes. But why? I know how.” Harry said.

“You know the bare mechanics, but I’m afraid that our Lord asked me to ensure that you receive proper instruction about dueling and its etiquette.” Harry only nodded when the man handed him dueling robes. He shrugged off his heavy Death Eater robes and pulled on the dueling robes. They were a gift from Voldemort himself and were laced with protective spells to ensure that he didn’t lose his student through a careless hex. Harry actually liked them. They fit well and allowed him to move.

“Very well,” Harry answered.

“How have you been, Tom?” Zareh was starting to become annoying with his questions. It appeared that Zareh had decided that “Tom” was not there of his own free will and Zareh had been subtly hinting the last few lessons that there was another choice in the war, a group that could protect him, if he wanted it. Harry ignored his efforts.

“Fine, William.” Harry answered. “I’ve been studying a lot and working on those spells we covered last time.”

“Good, good.” The man said absently.

“I heard there was some trouble at Hogwarts,” Harry said with slight curiosity in his voice.

“A bit, yes. Nothing that the Headmaster couldn’t handle,” Zareh told him.

Well, if that's how you're going to play it. "Oh? That's good." Harry said calmly. Liar.

"So, you already know how to bow?" Zareh said as he moved.

Harry took his own place and bowed in answer, readying his wand at the last second.

"Very good. Standard rules apply. No Unforgivables and nothing permanently disabling," Zareh said as he set up a timer.

"You've taken away everything fun," Harry pouted. "Not fair."

"Oh? You've suddenly decided to act your age," Zareh asked in a mocking tone. "I didn't think that was possible."

"Just because I don't enjoy talking about Quidditch doesn't mean I am an adult, William." The timer sounded, and Harry waited for Zareh to make the first move. Zareh was a predictable dueler; he started out with a basic disarming spell and slowly moved up the scale until he was right below the Unforgivable curses. Harry frowned as he spun out of the path of a rather nasty hex that would have him unconscious for a week. That would not go over well with Bevie at all come tomorrow afternoon for the dress rehearsal.

"Tom!" Harry's head snapped towards his right and he nearly cringed. I've started answering to that bloody name! He saw Voldemort standing there, his red eyes glinting with an emotion Harry hesitated to name. It was only then that Harry noticed Zareh was trapped behind a shield. Voldemort had actually stopped the duel! "You know you don't need those words you've been saying." Voldemort told him.

Harry thought about what Voldemort said before nodding. If he wanted Harry to show off his ability to use spells without words, well, Harry wouldn't argue. The shield disappeared and Harry raised his wand and silently shot a disarming spell at Zareh. The man actually dropped to the ground to keep his wand. Zareh stared at Harry in shock. Well, well. Harry Potter and Voldemort scored against the

Order of the Phoenix. He nearly lost his wand due to his distraction from that utterly disturbing thought. I make it sound like we're working together! Harry was appalled and felt the need to take a hot, scouring shower. With bleach. Ugh!

Spell after spell was exchanged and ended with Harry holding Zareh's wand. He looked down at the oak wand in his hand and grinned. He had won against an Auror and Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. All by himself. Excellent.

"Good!" Voldemort said gleefully as he stepped forward. "Very good!" He motioned Harry towards him and Harry went over to him. Voldemort laid one hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed. "You've done very well, my student." Harry only nodded and looked over at Zareh.

Zareh stood up and dusted himself off. He ignored the blood running from a cut above his eye and joined Harry and Voldemort. "My young Lord, that was very well done." He said with a flat tone. "Now, may I have my wand back?" Zareh asked with a sheepish smile.

"This is the type of fighter you need in those Auror corps, eh?" Voldemort said as he smacked Harry on the back. Harry was vaguely reminded of Vernon Dursley and had to fight down a shudder. He and Paul had worked on the "Vernon issue", but that didn't mean Harry was ready to face him yet. If at all. He would be happier if Vernon was, oh, on Jupiter. Or the Sun, since Vernon couldn't survive the heat.

"If he ever appears for a job, I'll threaten my boss's life just to get him hired." Zareh said. "I didn't know you could do silent spell casting."

"We've been working on it," Harry said, motioning between himself and Voldemort.

"You have been holding out on me," Zareh said with a firm grin. "That was masterfully planned. You could use that skill in a real duel. Let your opponent think you need the spells, and then let him have it."

“Of course, Professor. That was the plan all along,” Harry had no idea what Voldemort was planning, but it sounded good. He saw Voldemort nod silently and he relaxed a little. Good. That was great. He had played Voldemort’s game without a single mistake.

“You’re dismissed, Zareh. Tom’s had enough for tonight, I think.” Voldemort reached out and latched onto Harry’s shoulder again.

“Of course, my Lord,” Zareh bowed quickly before removing his dueling robes. “I wish the both of you a pleasant evening.” He disappeared from the room.

Harry holstered his wand and unbuttoned his dueling robes. A house elf appeared and held out its spindly arms for the clothing. Harry nodded his thanks and gave his dueling robes to the house elf. He nearly leapt out of his skin and started running when he heard the door slam shut behind him. He whirled around and studied Voldemort. The man was upset. Extremely upset. Uh-oh.

“Did you think I didn’t notice?” Voldemort hissed. Harry suddenly wished he hadn’t given up his dueling robes so quickly. He frantically lowered some of the protections he had on himself. If Voldemort were to discover that set of abilities, Harry would never see the outside world again. He lowered the last one just in time as a silent spell from Voldemort thrust him backwards to hit the wall. Harry fought for his balance and studied Voldemort. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out that you sent that Muggle to Hogwarts?” Voldemort snarled at Harry.

Oops. Another spell caused Harry to hold his breath as he fought for control. He longed to put up his protection spells again, but knew that Voldemort looked for the physical evidence of his “discipline” and delighted in seeing Harry step carefully as he walked away from such sessions. How did he know? Harry wondered. Did that mean Voldemort had a spy at Hogwarts? It was possible. Or did he catch the spell work? Either way, Harry was in trouble.

“What shall it be this evening, my disobedient student? A few Crucios? A thrashing? Pain spells? Scouring charm? Or something

else?" Harry felt his face drain of blood and he swallowed heavily. He didn't want this to happen. Not at all. "What did that uncle of yours do to you?" Voldemort asked. A chill crept over Harry's body. "Turn around. Hands on the wall."

Harry stared at Voldemort, not quite processing what he was hearing. He couldn't do this. He couldn't allow this. He wouldn't allow Voldemort to beat him like some common Mug-, er, his uncle. He realized what he almost thought and shuddered a bit. "Now, my child." Voldemort's voice cut through Harry's self-loathing. Harry shook his head.

Voldemort advanced so quickly Harry barely had time to react. He fought against Voldemort's arm and tried to ignore the pain in his head. He erected his Occlumency shields and felt something odd happening to his head. "There we are. You are much more tractable when you're Confounded." Voldemort said happily. Harry shook his head to clear it, but it didn't do much good. He started separating his magic from the spell and had almost shoved it off when Voldemort cuffed him. Stars danced in front of Harry's eyes as Voldemort used a Sticking charm to hold Harry's hands to the wall. The Confundus charm dissipated and Harry was already hard at work on the Sticking spell when he heard something that made his blood run cold.

"Save a common Muggle; get beaten like a common Muggle." His shirt vanished, leaving his back open to Voldemort. Harry thanked his lucky stars by name when he remembered that he had placed invisibility spells on his throwing darts. Leather snapped an instant before Harry felt it. He bit down his hiss of pain and focused on dismantling the spell holding his hands. Voldemort was beating him with a belt! It brought back too many memories of his childhood, of Vernon, of being helpless. Harry seethed with the injustice. Wasn't it enough that he had lived with this while growing up? Why did he have to put up with it now?

He was almost out of the spell when Voldemort somehow managed to land one hit directly on top of the previous one. Harry did let out a hiss of pain and ground his teeth. "Enjoying yourself, Tom?" Voldemort taunted. Voldemort paused and Harry counted up the hits to ten. Ten straps with a belt. Surely that was enough for Voldemort.

Harry heard a mumbled spell and he howled. "So, the shock spells do have a purpose." Voldemort said to himself. Harry took a deep breath and was glad for it when Voldemort shocked him again. Harry's body rocked with the spell, and he started to shield himself. He had to get home under his own power, after all. He would not let Voldemort see him weak and crawling like a Death Eater!

Harry was ready to reconsider that idea when Voldemort decided that he was tired of playing. He had used the belt again, to make the count an even twenty, and put Harry through another round of shock spells. The magic holding his hands disappeared and Harry had to lean against the wall for a few seconds before standing on his own feet. His magic rushed to strengthen him as he turned around to face Voldemort.

"Have you learned your lesson?" Voldemort asked in a patronizing voice.

"Yes, sir," Harry answered calmly. "May I explain my actions?" Harry asked.

Voldemort gave him a blank look. "If you can," He said with a dubious tone.

"I knew the Muggle was nearing insanity when I stepped forward. In fact, that last bit of magic I performed on him should guarantee it. I meant it as a warning to those who would stand against you." Harry explained in a quiet voice. "To frighten them."

"While the idea has merit, that was not for you to decide," Voldemort said. He motioned Harry to come closer to him. Harry inched up to him and waited, bracing for another attack. "Turn around." Not again. "Episkey." Voldemort tapped his wand and Harry felt an odd sensation crawl over his back. "I'm not a healer, but you won't bleed to death."

Harry nodded. He was confused, in terrible pain, and close to breaking. He was ready to go back to his room and cower in the blankets. No, he wanted to go home and cower in his room while

Aunt Petunia stood guard with her cast iron skillet. Voldemort handed him his shirt, but Harry didn't bother putting it on. He only rolled it into a ball and tucked it under his arm. Voldemort waved his wand and Harry's Death Eater robe floated over to him and draped around his body. He handed Harry his mask and waited while Harry put it on. A quick motion of his wrist adjusted Harry's hood. "Go home, my dark child. You've done well, accepting the consequences of your actions. Remember that I am the leader, not you."

“Yes, sir.” Harry mumbled as the door unsealed. He left Voldemort behind and made for the door to the outside. He passed a few Death Eaters, and one actually stopped him to talk to him. He clapped a hand on Harry’s back and Harry responded by hexing the man with Jelly-Legs. He didn’t even feel bad about it.

He stumbled outside and crept through the cemetery. The fog was thicker than earlier in the evening. He allowed himself to disappear in it and whispered his password for his Portkey. He collapsed soundlessly on his bed and waited until he could breathe without pain.

He nearly leapt through the ceiling when a hand fell on his back. He gasped and fought to get up, but the hand only pressed harder. He collapsed back onto the bed and clenched his eyes shut in pain as he waited.

He felt the person lean over him. "I smell blood. You have a lot of explaining to do, my little magus." Harry started and gasped as his back throbbed. "Easy," Khalid said calmly. "Look at me," He demanded of Harry.

Harry looked up and tried to think of a good explanation. Khalid reached out with two fingers and touched the center of Harry's forehead. Harry's eyes crossed and then closed as he felt lethargy spread through his body. He would defend his actions when he woke up tomorrow.

[illegible]

Author's Note 2: Thanks to everyone who helped with this chapter: the fabulous beta, Mimi Taylor, everyone who reviewed last chapter,

Keres Weiland, for listening to me complain about schoolwork and plot, Trio Maxwell, for remaining patient with me, and last but not least, my friend Renee, for her enthusiastic response to all of my stories.

Also, I was wondering if you all could tell me where you're from and what languages you speak when you review? I have a bet on with one of professors and I have to show her that more than just Americans read fanfiction. Please? Thanks!

Emma Lipardi

“Hmm?” Bleys looked up and over at Harry.

“What about this spell?” Harry lifted the fringe and pointed at his scar.

“Ah, the Killing Curse,” Bleys stared down at his feet. “Same thing.” He folded his hands into his robes and closed his eyes.

Harry sighed and kicked the water again. “What about the connection we share?”

Bleys opened one eye and frowned. “I was afraid you would ask about that.”

“I want to know,” Harry said and stared at his teacher.

“Are you sure that you want to know?” Bleys asked.

“No. I don’t want to know,” Harry said with a shrug and a dejected sigh.

“Ah, good,” Bleys closed his and appeared ready to start napping in the sunshine.

Harry reached out and pulled up a long blade of grass. He folded it between his thumbs and started whistling. He threw the grass away and sighed as he pulled up his feet from the water. He crossed his legs and sighed again. “But I need to know.”

“Blast,” Bleys cursed and opened his eyes again. “The gods are laughing at me, you know.”

“Could be worse,” Harry muttered. “They could have made you me.”

Bleys snorted and then smiled at his student. “True, my child.” Bleys stood and stared down at the water for a few minutes as the water fell and tumbled over the tiny stones on the bottom.

Harry looked up at him and smiled. He knew Bleys would explain as soon as he figured out how he wanted to say it. It was only a matter of time for him.

“The curse scar you have is different from the Killing Curse, Harry,” Bleys said as he folded his feet beneath him and sat down. “In fact, it is from the deepest magic that exists in the world.”

“Deep magic?” Harry asked in confusion.

“Please,” Bleys held out a hand, interrupting Harry’s question. “This is going to be extremely difficult for me to explain as it is. Could you hold your questions until the end?”

“Sure,” Harry decided that his question wasn’t too important. He could ask what Bleys meant by “deep magic” later in the day, if necessary.

“There is some magic we do instinctively,” Bleys started as he visibly struggled to put his thoughts into words. “Magic that we’re not even aware of doing until after the fact,” He paused for a moment before continuing. “for instance, when your mother gave her life for yours, she didn’t say a spell or incantation, stop to perform a rite, or call on any power other than her profound love for you.” Bleys stopped again. “You did the same thing when Voldemort tried to kill you.”

Bleys lifted a stone and dropped it into the water, staring at the ripples it made in silence. “This is very difficult to explain, Harry. When your mother died, she used her deepest magic, the very thing that made her magic, to protect you. When Voldemort cast the Killing Curse, you used the primal magic you have to protect your life, for you already knew your mother was dead and why she died.”

Harry opened his mouth to protest and Bleys cut him off again. “Trust me, Harry. Children that young know when their mothers die, even before most other people do. I’ve seen it happen. So, when you protected your life at a time when innocence should have been the only thing you knew, you gave up a part of yourself.”

Harry's brow knit with confusion. He gave up a part of himself? How was that possible? Did Bleys mean literally? Or metaphorically?

Bleys's smile was sad when he looked at Harry. "Yes, the sacrifice was so great that it left its mark." He reached out with one rough finger and tapped the scar on Harry's forehead. "You gave up a part of yourself to survive, invariably tying yourself to Voldemort so long as he survived." Bleys smoothed Harry's hair and held back the fringe Harry used to hide the scar from prying eyes. "It's not a mark of shame. It's a mark of survival."

"I gave something of myself to Voldemort?" Harry asked in disbelief. "How did I do that? I was just a baby!"

"Your mother gave her life to enable you to have enough power to defend yourself. Her magic went to you. Combine that with the fact that you are already a wizard of immense power and that was enough to ensure your survival." Bleys petted Harry's hair again as he smiled. "The scar you have is a sign that you needed to defend yourself and that you succeeded."

"So, how do I get that part of myself back?" Harry wondered aloud. "Can I get it back?"

"Oh, yes. It's possible." Bleys assured him as he drew Harry closer to him and wrapped an arm around him. "It is extremely possible. It's just a matter of getting Voldemort to give something of himself to you. It completes the ripples, if you will allow me to use the analogy."

"The Parseltongue—" Harry stopped when he saw Bleys shaking his head.

"That is yours and yours alone, Harry. A gift of the gods, I would call it. Or a joke on you, considering your enemy has the same talent." Bleys told him.

Harry sat within the circle of Bleys's arms and sighed. "So, my scar doesn't mean what everyone thinks it means."

“No, everyone thinks it means that you survived the Killing Curse, which you did. Just not in the way that everyone thinks you did.”

“ Oh,” Harry said in puzzlement. “So, Voldemort has to give something of himself to me,” Harry almost snorted, amused at the thought that Voldemort would ever do something like that.

“He’ll have to,” Bleys said calmly. “The Killing Curse is one of those spells that must have a rejoinder. He’ll give something of himself eventually.”

“Why?” Harry asked. “If he knew what he did and then what I did...”

“He has no choice, Harry. He will have to finish what you started so long ago,” Bleys said as he stood and placed Harry on his feet. “It started a circle. That circle must be closed before either of you can hope to continue on with your lives. Some of your talent is being drained by sustaining him and he cannot live on his own. The two of you are connected, but it’s a wide stretch and one or the other will have to close that circle.”

“He’ll probably try to kill me sooner or later,” Harry said darkly.

“He won’t be able to kill you,” Bleys said as he handed Harry his socks and boots. “Your protection you put up against him still protects you.” Bleys pointed at the scar and smirked. “That protection will continue for as long as he survives.”

“Oh,” Harry started pulling on one sock and hopped to keep his balance.

“Close the circle, Harry. That’s all you need to do, and then you’ll finish what you started when you were just a baby.”

“What I started?”

“The Killing Curse. He tried to kill you, so you used your mother’s magic and a bit of yourself to create a shield so powerful that you managed to send the curse back at him. Unfortunately, the link you share with him also kept him from dying.”

“It’s my fault that he’s still alive?” Harry felt his face drain of blood.

“No,” Bleys said so firmly that Harry had to believe him. “It is not your fault.”

Harry studied his teacher curiously. "How can you be so sure?"

“Self-defense is just that. Had he not tried to kill you, had he left you alone, his soul would not have been ripped from his first body.” Harry shuddered for a moment as he remembered the ritual Voldemort had used to return him to corporeal form.

“I gave something else of myself when he got a new body,” Harry rolled up his sleeve and showed Bleys the scar he had from that night. “He took some of my blood to create a new body.”

“Then you and he are tied closer than I thought. Blood magic is very powerful.” Bleys pursed his lips and sighed. “The part that he gives you, Harry, must be very deep magic, coming from what makes him magical as well. Do you think you can get him to do that?”

“I’m not sure,” Harry said in confusion. “I’ll have to think about it. What could he possibly give me?”

“Hmm, we’ll have to think on that, won’t we?” Bleys said in a thoughtful tone. “Come along, now. It’s almost time for our next meal, and I know that your stomach won’t let you forget something like that!”

[illegible]

Khalid stood and studied the boy on the bed. Something was going on with the child. Death Eater robes and a mask told him everything he needed to know. The only confusing part of this all was that the

child did not have a Dark Mark. Khalid sniffed and fought off a hungry urge. Yes, the blood was calling to him, but he did not want to violate the trust the boy harbored for him. Very few people would trust a vampire when they were conscious, much less unconscious. Harry would not be asleep if he didn't feel safe around the vampire.

Khalid reached down and wrestled the oblivious boy out of the Death Eater robes. He studied the half-healed marks before him and grimaced. It appeared as though someone had been at the boy with a belt or something similar. The little one does not deserve such things after his childhood.

The vampire reached out one hand and held it over the child's back, allowing some healing energy to go to the boy's wounds. Khalid had told the child he hadn't cared for his secrets when he was in Harry's mind, but he had noticed some things that he had seen before. The child was extremely defensive about his emotions; only children who had suffered through abuse would so effectively defend their emotions from others. The mind part labeled family had almost completely removed any male presence outside of the boy's mentors.

A few questions to a semi-conscious Harry about his home life had revealed that Harry was a very fragile person wrapped in layers of strength and defense. It was admirable, that a person as young as Harry would be so prepared to give his life for others and fight for what he thought was right. Admirable, and extremely heartbreaking. Khalid had been tempted to turn the boy there and then in the Chamber of Secrets and whisk him away from the petty mortals that didn't know what a precious gift Harry was to the world. He had held Harry in position and had his fangs bared, the child mumbling all the while, until he heard the words "Aunt Petunia" drop from the child's mouth. A quick question to the boy about his aunt revealed the fledgling relationship the two shared and how much Harry wanted that relationship now that he had it. Who was Khalid to deny him such happiness?

He pondered the child and his actions. Would Harry actually join the Dark Lord? For what purpose?

Harry's eyes fluttered open and Khalid leaned down to look Harry in the face. "Hello, little magus!" He said brightly.

"Where?" Where had Bleys and the cottage gone? He had just been there. Harry looked around for a few seconds before his mind caught up with him. "Oh, it was a dream." Harry said to himself as he fought for a sitting position with Khalid so close to him. "Why are you here?"

"Oh, I was in the neighborhood and decided to drop in, only to find no peacefully sleeping little magus, but an empty and cold bed." Khalid straightened and tried to look his most menacing. "Care to tell me where my little magus was and why he returned dressed in Death Eater robes and mask, flogged on his back, and barely conscious?"

"Not really," Harry answered. "Thanks for healing my back the rest of the way."

"You did not answer my question," Khalid said, plainly put out at having his answers denied to him. "I fear I may have to fetch that therapist of yours and you may explain it to him...or your aunt. I'm not sure which would receive an answer from you."

"Khalid, please. Not Paul or my aunt. I'll never see the light of day again if either of them found out about it."

Khalid sniffed. "It's not so bad, being in the dark. I quite enjoyed it when I was first turned." Khalid said in a sulk.

"That's not what I meant! They'll just smother me or something like that. They're overprotective." Harry stood up and gathered his robes and mask in his arms. He crossed the room to his dresser and folded the garment before putting it back into place. He hid the mask again and covered his face with his hands for a brief second before lacing his fingers behind his head and holding them there. "This is really hard to explain and I would appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about it."

"Hmm, alright. I agree to keep your secret if you agree to tell either Paul or your aunt about this," Khalid said.

Harry thought about what Khalid said for a second before nodding. "I agree to your terms." Harry said calmly. "Please take a seat. I'm going to get into some nightclothes before I return to bed."

"Very well," Khalid perched on the chair at Harry's desk and waited while Harry took some pajamas into the bathroom and changed. Khalid smiled when Harry returned. "Tell me now. I very much want to know."

"Well, it all started right after my godfather died," Harry told Khalid everything. The fights inside his head, Voldemort exhausting him so Harry would be easier to manage, the kind words, the offers, the tea, the start of involuntary lessons, Harry's portkey and required lessons, Zareh teaching him. All of it.

"Oh, William would love to know that he's been teaching you all these months! He would turn as red as blood with embarrassment!"

"You can't tell him!" Harry said sharply. "This plan of mine needs to be kept secret. Voldemort trusts me more with each passing day. He keeps telling me things. Sooner or later, he'll slip up with a weakness or something that will give us an edge."

"Is it worth it?" Khalid said, suddenly appearing behind Harry when he had been directly in front of him. Khalid laid a soft hand on Harry's back. "Is it worth the pain you are suffering?"

"More than worth it," Harry said finally. "I'd do almost anything to see that man gone from this earth."

"Very well," Khalid folded his arms and sniffed. "You said this Sensei person knows."

"Yes, he caught me. Otherwise, he wouldn't know at all." Harry admitted.

"And you trust him to treat any injuries you incur during your little promenade as a Death Eater."

“Yes, I do.” Harry answered calmly. “He doesn’t agree with what I’m doing, but he understands why I have to do it.”

“Fine. I won’t tell anyone. Just remember to tell your therapist or your aunt, yes?”

“Certainly,” Harry said. He yawned suddenly and blinked in surprise.

“You should get some more sleep. I know they like to wake you early. You have a little while before the dawn comes.” Khalid said as he went over to the bed and pulled the blankets back. “In,” he ordered with a large smile.

“No problem.” Harry crawled into his bed and lay down. Khalid pulled the blankets over him and tucked him in.

“Do not leave this bed before daylight or I will take you to Transylvania and allow Dracula himself to look after you.” Khalid said as he tucked the blankets under the mattress.

“That doesn’t sound very reassuring,” Harry ventured.

“It was not meant to be,” Khalid said with a smile. “It is a threat of the most serious kind.” Khalid reached out one finger and touched Harry on the forehead. “Sleep, now, my little magus.”

“Hate when,” Harry yawned. “You do that.” He finished tiredly.

“Just go to sleep,” Khalid stroked the hair on Harry’s head and Harry found himself drifting off to sleep. A faint humming reached his ears and he would have blushed if he hadn’t been so tired; Khalid was humming what could only be a lullaby.

[illegible]

A faint knock on the door was all the warning Harry had to disarm the spells he had cast the night before. He threw out one hand and the

door unsealed. "Weird. The door stuck." Paul's voice said from the other side. "Good morning, Harry. Ready for opening night?" He asked, a little too cheerfully for Harry's tastes, as he entered the room.

Harry collapsed backwards in bed and pulled the blankets over his head before moaning. "Go away, Paul. Great actors need their beauty sleep." Harry tried to sound serious, but he ended up sounding like a petulant teenager. "Isn't Sensei supposed to wake me at the crack of dawn?" He asked from under his blanket.

"Yes, but I decided to take his turn today. It's time to wake up. Breakfast is being served in thirty minutes."

"I got to sleep in?" Harry asked as he pulled the blanket down a bit.

"All the way until seven in the morning. It's already light out. Amazing, isn't it?" Paul asked in good humor.

"Yeah," Harry said. He must have been more tired than he thought. Of course, that was normal after a Voldemort lesson. "Guess I should get up."

"Also, putting a sign on your door that says 'Quiet Please – Boys Need Their Sleep' was a great idea. Boggled your bodyguards' minds when they couldn't figure out how the sign got there."

"I didn't put a sign up...Khalid!"

"Pardon?" Paul asked in confusion.

"Khalid was here last night. He must have done it."

"Did he check himself into the visitor log?" Paul asked with his mouth threatening to smile.

"Funny, Paul. Really hysterical. I can't breathe, I'm laughing that hard. Ha ha ha." Harry glared at Paul.

“You know something, Harry?” Paul said as he turned towards the door.

“What’s that?” Harry asked as he fought his way free from the covers and stood.

“You need to have some caffeine. You just can’t take a joke in the morning!” Paul fled as Harry’s pillow was launched at him.

[illegible]

Harry sat down at one of the huge mirrors and turned on the lights that surrounded it. His make-up was already laid out for him and he grimaced. This was his least favorite part about acting. The make-up. He reached for the first pot of color he was supposed to use and opened it. The brilliant thing about the make-up for Dracula was that Bevie had a make-up artist friend of his come into the school and teach Harry how to do the special effects he needed to look dead and alive at the same time. It was all a matter of subtle shading and lines. It had been a lot of fun working with Sarah, and now he knew how to apply everything on his own.

He picked up a sponge and started applying the base. It went everywhere, face, neck, hands up to just past his wrist, back of the neck. He needed a hot shower to remove every trace of it, but it was still a lot of fun. He looked completely different in just that. He smirked to himself and started on his lines. He made them dark for now, knowing that they would blend into the rest of what he had to put on. “Shadows” went into the hollow of his cheeks, eyes, and under his chin. He was already thin and those shadows would give him a look of gauntness. “I am...Professor Snape,” he muttered to himself, practicing one of the man’s glares in the mirror. He outlined his eyes and looked up in the mirror to see Bevie standing behind him. “I’m okay, Bevie. I’m not nervous, my make-up is almost done, and I know all my lines. Don’t worry.”

“Ah, good. Good. One thing is going right.” Bevie moved away and Harry snickered to himself. Bevie never did handle opening night well.

He was always a massive bundle of nerves and too much coffee and tea.

Harry finished with the eyeliner and pondered the rest of the make-up he was supposed to use. He loathed lipstick but he had to admit the face looked strange with no lipstick. He sighed and picked it up.

“Evan!” He turned to his right and had just enough time to smile as the camera flashed in his face. “Gotcha!” Bug announced, triumphant at having captured a picture of a smiling Harry.

“Alright, you got me, Bug. Now, you go do whatever you are supposed to be doing and let me finish my make-up.” Harry told him while waving an imperial hand.

Bug rolled his eyes and snapped off a quick bow in Harry’s direction. “Of course, Lord Dracula. Whatever you say, Lord Dracula.” Bug continued bowing until he was out of sight.

“What a strange boy,” One of Harry’s bodyguards said from his place in the corner.

“He’s been worse,” Harry said as he turned back to the mirror. “If you would like to go sit down in the audience, you may. I don’t think anyone is going to attack me here.” Harry said in a low voice. The bodyguard only gave him a look and he sighed. They were getting too good at the game of “Let’s get rid of the Bodyguards”. It was quite frustrating.

Dress call went up and Harry smiled. His make-up was finished just in time. He left the mirror and went to retrieve his costume from the crew. Murmurs from the seats told him the audience size was starting to grow and he hoped that everyone would keep their nerves in check. Susan handed him his costume and Harry slipped behind one of the changing curtains. He heard girls giggling again and he stuck his head out to face them. “Ah, ladies.” He drawled in his accent. “I’ve been expecting you. Let’s have dinner, yes?” He reached out one hand and lightly touched one girl’s wrist. She and the others fled and Harry could hear their giggling from wherever they landed. Being

Dracula just called the girls to him. Now, if only he could manage to attract them like that when he wasn't in costume...

[illegible]

Harry crept through the stone arches, blending in with the fog that hung about his love's garden. It suited his purposes and masked his arrival from all but her. He stopped beneath her window and stared up at it longingly, chary to move forward and startle her, but also afraid not to continue and miss her company for the evening. He raised one hand towards the glass and beckoned her. He could hear her heartbeat singing through the night. He gestured again, impatient to see her face and hold her in his arms, to nurture her growing fascination with the night.

The window opened and the curtains parted to reveal her face. She was confused, as though unsure what had called her to the window. Her smile transformed her face and Harry felt his silent heart lift; she was happy to see him. She turned away from the window and doused the light within before she returned to climb out. He rushed forward to help her through so she wouldn't be hurt and pulled her to him as soon as she was steady on her feet.

“Good evening, my Lucy,” Harry said as he brushed her hair from her face. Lucy smiled up at him as he wrapped his cloak around her and guided her to a stone arch. Wolves howled in the distance and Harry’s own smile faded at the noise. He tightened his hold on the girl underneath his arm. “Listen to them, the children of the night. What sad music they make.”

“Do you think it’s sad?” Lucy asked as she trailed a finger alongside his cloak as she twisted to face him.

Harry nodded. "So lonely, like weeping,"

“I think it’s a wonderful sound,” Lucy said, her face brightening once again. Harry was surprised and pleased. There was always something new to discover when he was with her. “I really love the night. It’s so simple...”

“So deceptive,” Harry told her as he pulled her against him.

“So exciting,” Lucy ran her hands up his arms to link around his neck.

Harry smiled and reached up to take hold of her hands. He pulled them in front of them and held them in his own. He lifted each one to his mouth and dropped a light kiss on the back of each one. “You take the dawn for granted,” he said, dropping one hand and trailing one finger up the inside of her wrist. “The warm, hot sunlight.” He kissed her palm and lifted the corners of his mouth. “Ah, but the night...”

“Was made to enjoy,” Lucy said, drawing her hand out of his and laying it on the left side of his face. He leaned into the touch with a small sigh and closed his eyes.

“Yes,” he said happily, almost beside himself with the feelings he carried at that moment. She understood. She understood the night, no, it was more than that. She wanted the night. Craved it as he craved blood. “Yes, it was. It was made to enjoy life.” He whispered. “And love,” he opened his eyes and could almost read what she wanted in her eyes. Her gaze faltered and dropped to the ground beneath their feet. “Look at me,” he put one finger under her chin and tried to lift her face to his. “Look,” he requested, tugging at her chin. Her eyes finally rose to meet his. Harry requested in Romanian that she smile for him. She gave him a light smile. “There, you do understand.”

“No, really. I have no idea what you said,” Lucy told him in a low tone.

“I said, ‘It would be nice to see you smile’,”

She smiled that smile that made him think of the last sunrise he had seen.

“You must forgive me.” Harry told her as he returned the smile.

Harry lay in his coffin with his new bride beside him. He smiled to himself and hugged her to him. Lucy gave him an odd look, but relaxed against him. The lid flew open and someone wrenched her away from him. He exploded out of his coffin and faced the intruders. "You are now in my domain, gentlemen. And you shall not leave."

He advanced on the two men, only to have holy objects thrust in his face. He drew away from the objects and saw Lucy cowering away from them in the corner. "You fools!" he motioned for her to go out the other doorway. He saw her start to inch along the wall and decided to distract the men challenging him.

"Do you think with your crosses and your wafers you can destroy me? Me!" he folded his cloak around him and sneered at them. "You do not know how many men have come against me. I am the king of my kind." He turned to face the man who had plagued his last few decades. "You have accomplished nothing, Van Helsing." He spat the name as he would a curse. "Time is on my side. In a century, when you are dust, I will call Lucy, my queen, from her grave."

"No!" Harry only raised an eyebrow at the earnest young mortal in front of him. So young, so foolish.

"Yes," Harry affirmed. "I have in my time many brides, Mr. Harker, but I shall set Lucy above them all." That ought to upset the youngster.

"You won't get Lucy," Harker said in a fury.

Harry leaned towards him and gave the smuggest look he could manage. "She's mine already,"

"No!" Harker screamed and rushed forward with a stake and hammer. Harry twisted aside, only to find Van Helsing directly behind Harker and ready for him. A cross was shoved into his face; a movement threw a table at the offensive man. The cross clattered to the floor and he advanced again, determined to end the stalking from Van Helsing. It was growing tedious. He felt Harker coming up behind

him, so he knocked Van Helsing away and turned to face Harker. He grasped the lapels of Harker's coat and lifted him into the air to decide which side of the neck was more likely to provide blood faster.

Bright light hit him in the face and he dropped Harker to shield his eyes. He screamed in agony as the sunlight burned his skin.

“No!” he heard Lucy shriek from somewhere to his right. He slunk back towards the darkness near his coffin. He needed to lay in his dirt to heal, to prepare for the next confrontation. He knocked the two advancing men aside. He heard something crack in one of their bodies and was satisfied that they were incapacitated for the moment. He crawled inside his coffin. “Lucy, come to me,” he held out a hand to her. “Come, my own.”

Lucy crawled in beside him and wrapped her arms around his neck. He smiled tightly against the pain and closed his eyes. He just needed a few minutes. The lid flew open and he screamed his fury just as the stake pierced through his body. Lucy was wrenched away from him. He held out his hand in entreaty, begging whatever power there was not to take his sun away from him. She left his sight and the stake was twisted. One hand held onto the side of the coffin as he fought against the oncoming darkness. One last twist caused his entire body to jerk and he lost his grip. His hand dropped and he lay still.

Van Helsing stood up and took a deep breath as he turned and walked away. Voices chattered as they led the now weeping Lucy away from “the dreadful ordeal”. He couldn’t hear anything as he raised one hand and gripped the side of the coffin. Fools they were indeed, to think he could be so easily defeated.

[illegible]

The curtain dropped and Harry scrambled out of the coffin to disappear backstage. He waved to the girl playing Lucy on the other side of the stage and she stuck out her tongue. He rolled his eyes as Bug patted him on the back. The crew went out on stage for curtain call first and Harry waited for his turn. He heard the applause increase for each new section of the cast and he nearly fell over in

laughter as Lucy nearly tripped when the applause increase startled her.

Finally, it was Harry's turn. He jumped in place for a second before going onstage. His smile only grew wider when the applause thundered around the auditorium. He made it to the center mark and bowed, unable to control the smile spreading across his face. He heard a few girls screaming from the audience and tentatively identified one as Hermione, though he couldn't be sure. He bowed again and motioned to the entire cast and crew. The applause increased again and they all bowed as one. He laughed a little and waved. Everyone else on stage joined in before the curtain fell.

Harry didn't need to be told to run out to the main hallway. He and the rest of the cast bolted from the stage and out the stage door to line up in the hallway. Harry's bodyguards appeared behind them and put on their intimidation faces.

He grinned at the rest of the cast, almost too hyper to stand still. It was a rush, this performance, the lines. He loved it. The doors to the auditorium opened and Harry braced himself for a crowd of people. He took a deep breath and plastered on a smile. "You did so well!" One woman said. "Gave me chills!" She shuddered dramatically and moved on.

Harry greeted each person that stopped in front of him and answered the same questions and compliments over and over. He nodded several times and shook many hands. This was not as fun as performing, but it was okay. It was nice to have his acting appreciated.

"There he is!" He heard Khalid say from his right. Harry turned and only had time to process the fact that Khalid was there before he was picked up and swung around. "There's my little one!"

"Hello, Khalid," Harry said as he squirmed out of the man's arms. "Did you enjoy the show?"

"Did I enjoy the show?" Khalid asked in disbelief. "It was amazing. Simply amazing. Oh, there is someone I want you to meet!" Khalid

waved over a man and Harry felt his eyes grow wide. "May I present the boy I told you about?" Khalid said to the man. The man nodded and Harry's mouth went dry. "This is..." Khalid looked around and leaned over to whisper something to the man. "This is Vlad Tepes, Voivod of Wallachia." Khalid whispered the sentence into Harry's ear.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir." Harry said weakly as Dracula himself shook his hand.

"Likewise," Dracula said as he smiled at Harry. "I have not seen such a good performance in some time." The lightly accented voice told Harry that this was not a fake Dracula by any road. This was the real Dracula. "You must come visit me sometime soon. I would love to show you my home, child. You will learn about the reality of Transylvania there."

"I'd love to," Harry found himself saying. "As long as my aunt agrees."

"Oh, I'm sure she will, given time. I look forward to seeing you again." Dracula smirked and patted Harry on the shoulder. "Khalid, we have other actors to congratulate." Khalid settled for a quick pat on Harry's head before disappearing down the line.

"Evan!" Harry didn't even have time to prepare; Hermione slammed into him full force and proceeded to strangle him. "Evan! Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you drop a hint? That was amazing!" Hermione jumped up and down in excitement and then returned to squeezing the breath from his body.

"Mi!" Harry separated her hands and put his hands on her shoulders to hold her in one place. "Calm down."

"Calm down? After seeing the best play ever? That's impossible!" Hermione actually squealed and hugged him again.

"Well, I'm glad you liked it. Have you seen Aunt Petunia?" He asked as he patted her back.

“She was right behind me,” Hermione said as her good sense reasserted itself. She pulled away and turned around. “Ah, here she comes!”

Petunia and Remus pushed their way through the people crowding around Harry. “Excuse me, yes, my nephew, pardon me.” Petunia chanted as Remus found an opening and pulled Petunia through the people and towards Harry.

“Hi, Aunt Petunia!” Harry said brightly.

“Oh my goodness!” Petunia pulled Harry into a hug and managed a fairly good imitation of Hermione’s Operation Squeeze All Air Out of Harry. “That was so good! You did such a wonderful job and I can’t say enough how wonderful that was!” All of her words came out in a rush as she held his face where she could see it. “I couldn’t believe that was you up there! You looked and sounded so different!” Harry relaxed into the hugging and smiled as he rested his head against his aunt’s shoulder. This was nice.

“Easy, Petunia,” Remus said with a chuckle. “The boy has to breathe.”

Petunia released Harry with a smile and Remus stepped forward to pull Harry into a hug. “We’re both very proud of you, Harry.” Remus whispered into his ear. “You have an amazing gift.”

“Thank you, Remus,” Harry said happily.

A group of giggling girls stopped to his right. One girl looked extremely nervous while the rest were egging her on. Remus gave Harry a significant look before stepping back. Hermione glared at them and Petunia only shrugged. She had no idea what was going on.

The first girl stepped forward and took a deep breath. “Could we have our picture taken with you?” She said in a rush.

Harry shot a quick glance at his bodyguards and one of them nodded. The girls were just that: girls.

“Sure,” Harry smiled at her. The entire group squealed when they saw his fangs still in his mouth. He motioned for them to step closer and Petunia took a camera from one of them to snap a photograph. The flash blinded him for only a second before Petunia said it was alright to move.

Several thank yous and one snatched hug later left Harry alone to greet other audience members. Petunia, Remus, Hermione and her parents (they had gotten lost around a corner...Harry suspected they had been snogging) all stood by him, fending off the more enthusiastic audience members.

“Brilliant, Potter.” He heard a voice say lightly from his right. He turned and saw Draco Malfoy dressed in a Muggle suit. “I never thought you would find something you were good at.”

“Is that a compliment, Malfoy?” Harry asked sharply.

“What a silly idea, me complimenting a Gryffindor.” Malfoy said as he held out his hand.

Harry only rolled his eyes and shook Draco’s hand. “What are you doing here, Malfoy?”

“Julie invited me,” Draco said with a smirk. “Just to let you know, I understand that you needed to touch her in a familiar manner tonight. Take care not to do it again.” Malfoy smirked at Harry in a ‘Master of the Universe’ way.

“Drake!” Julie brushed past Harry and threw herself into Draco’s arms. “You made it!”

“Yes, I promised I would,” Draco said as he returned the hug and brushed hair out of her face.

Harry’s brain shut down. “Mi, am I seeing Draco Malfoy kissing a girl?” He whispered to Hermione.

“Hmm?” Hermione asked. “Oh, that. Yes, you are.” Hermione said absently. “Drake’s been sneaking out for weeks to see her.”

“How did I not know about this?” Harry demanded.

“Oh, it must have slipped my mind. That and you were extremely busy with everything Dumbledore was doing,” Hermione told him.

“Well, how does he get out of Hogwarts?” Harry asked.

“Professor Snape has very high levels of concentration when working on a potion. Drake has a very light step. You do the math.” Hermione told him with a smile.

The crowds started to thin and Bevie motioned for everyone to go to the dining hall. The kitchen staff had set up refreshments for the actors...and their friends and family. Harry had a feeling mint chocolate chip ice cream was on the menu.

He smiled when he felt one of Petunia's arms drop around his shoulders and squeeze a little bit. So Draco Malfoy was dating a Muggle? It didn't matter so long as Harry and Petunia could spend a little family time together. He smiled. Family was good.

“Skywalker!” Hermione screeched. “They have your favorite ice cream!” She called out.

Yes, life was good.

[illegible]

Author's Note 2: Wow, what a response! Thanks to everyone that told me more than just Americans read fanfiction. My professor was a little surprised when I showed her the answers I received, so I definitely won the bet!

Author's Note: Um...hi? Sorry it's taken so long. It's been a crazy summer. And school year. No more delay. On to the story!

"Do you remember drawing this, Harry?" Paul asked as he handed over the drawing he had spent so much time staring at since Mr. Watt, the art teacher, had brought it into the office. Harry frowned and opened the folded paper, only to stop and stare at it when he saw the image on the paper.

"No one was supposed to find this," Harry told Paul as he closed the paper again and held it in his hands.

"Mm," Paul paused for a second. "Mr. Watt showed this to me some time ago." Paul told him.

"Oh," Harry bit his lip and looked down at the folded paper. "What about it?" He asked.

"I was wondering how many versions of you exist now?"

"I don't know," Harry said in a soft voice. "Sometimes, I feel like there's only one of me, and then there are so many of me that I don't understand what end is up."

Paul sat and considered what Harry said. "What you're describing is normal, Harry. We all do it. It's called a persona. Do you remember when we talked about those?"

"Yeah, it's a mask, right? A front we present to others when circumstances merit, right?"

"Almost verbatim. Well done, buddy." Paul smiled at Harry and pulled out a pad of drawing paper. "Now, I'm no artist, but I drew a picture of my own personae." He handed the pad to Harry and motioned for him to open it.

Harry flipped open the cover and saw four stick figures with different hats. He smiled at the primitive drawings and he heard Paul chuckle.

“I did say that I’m not much of an artist,” Paul said with laughter in his voice. “The hats are the closest I could get to masks.”

Harry looked up at Paul and then back down to the drawings. “There’s only four.”

“Yes, only four,” Paul said in an offhand manner. “This is me as a therapist,” he motioned to the stick figure with the mortarboard. “I went to school for this, so I thought was the best symbol. This,” he moved his finger to the next on the page, “is me as a bodyguard. That’s what I thought I wanted to do. Notice that I didn’t make a face for him, or hands?” Harry nodded. “I always felt a little helpless, and I guess that shows through in the drawing. Interesting, isn’t it?”

“It’s like your subconscious is saying something through the drawing.” Harry said.

“That’s it exactly,” Paul was glad he didn’t have to explain the concept to Harry. “There’s the image I present to my parents,” a small stick figure with a ball cap smiled up from the page, “and the last is who I am most of the time.” He motioned to the most detailed stick figure. This one had full facial features and hair. “Now, the point of this little adventure of my horrible drawing skills: personae are never complete.”

Harry tilted his head to the side and stared at the pad. “Are you trying to tell me that every persona has a little of another?”

“Thank goodness you understand where I’m going with this,” Paul said while wiping imaginary sweat from his forehead. “Every persona in your picture,” Paul pointed at the folded paper, “is a part of you, some aspect of yourself. Some persona leave over time, when you don’t need them anymore. You’ll develop more when you need them. The key thing to remember is where they end and where you begin.”

Harry didn’t do anything for a few minutes while he thought things over. “I’ll try,” Harry said finally.

“Good,” Paul told him as he turned to dig into his desk. “I have some pencils here, uh, that is what you draw with, right?”

“One of many,” Harry told him.

“Brilliant. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I would like you to draw another picture of your personae in our remaining time. Something to take with you when you leave tomorrow.” Paul said as he held out the pencils.

“All of them?” Harry asked.

“Every last one.” Paul told him with a tiny smirk.

Harry reached out a hand and accepted the pencils. “I’ll give it my best shot,” he said.

“There once was a very wise teacher and he said ‘Do, or do not. There is no try.’”

Harry couldn’t help laughing at Paul. He quoted Yoda! “Okay, I’ll draw a picture of my personae, so long as you don’t quote him again for the rest of the day.”

“I acquiesce to your request,” Paul said as he turned to his desk. “Now draw!”

Harry saluted and opened the pad to a clean page and chose a pencil. He studied the white page glaring up at him and he tapped the edge with a pencil. The last time he had drawn himself, he had used a broken crystal ball. He had felt broken then, and not in control of his own fate. Now, he was different. He put his pencil tip on the paper and waited. Something would come to him....ah.

Paul sat and watched as Harry drew. It was interesting to see his creative process start up. At first, nothing happened and then Harry was lost to his own world. The pencil started moving and it didn’t stop. Harry’s right pinky finger started turning gray from the graphite when Harry dragged it over the image. One pencil found its way to his ear and the other slowly became shiny with the movements. Harry

paused once for almost a full minute before his head lowered again and his hand moved faster than ever. Harry drew for a straight forty-five minutes before he allowed the pad of paper to drop to his lap and the pencil to fall from his hand.

“Finished?” Paul asked, secretly amused at Harry. There were times Paul found Harry to be the most interesting person he knew. “Willing to share?” Harry only nodded and held out the pad of paper. Paul took it and studied the image laid out on the paper. This one was much more encouraging.

“So, tell me where you are in this image?” Paul said as he tried to make sense of the background.

“The room is the Room of Requirement at Hogwarts,” Harry said. “It’s a magical room that changes as you need things.” Harry explained.

“Why there?”

“Well, because the personae are only used when needed. I felt that it was appropriate, putting them there.” Harry shrugged.

“Okay. Can you explain your personae?”

“The first is the strongest, the one I need to use when I’m in danger.” Harry said, pointing at the one in the foreground. “He protects.”

“Protects what?”

“Everything about me,” Harry admitted. “I’m not really safe and haven’t really been safe in my life. I won’t be safe until Voldemort is gone and Dumbledore decides that he can’t influence me.”

“So, this is the one you put up when threatened?” Paul studied the image. Like the image in the crystal ball, this Harry was also dressed in armor, but he was not injured. His armor was clean and the facial

expression was so strong that even Paul had to admit that he would be hard-pressed to face anyone like that. It was an expectant look, as though he already knew the future and he could only see victory there.

“Yeah,” Harry said happily. “You remember when I told you about the Chambers of Secrets? The sword he’s holding is the Gryffindor sword.”

“Ah, yes, I see the name on it now. And this one?” Paul pointed to a small shadowy figure behind the rest.

“Me when I was younger,” he answered. “See, everyone will have to go through the rest before they find him.”

“Okay,” Paul acknowledged. “What about this one with the skull in his hand?”

“It’s a little cliché, isn’t it? He’s the actor.” Harry laughed to himself. “‘Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him well, Horatio.’” Harry quoted.

“What’s that from?” Paul wondered how many speeches Harry had memorized.

“Hamlet,” Harry informed him.

“Uh-huh. And this one?” Paul asked.

“He’s just Harry,”

Paul blinked. “Pardon?”

“It’s just that I don’t feel much like the person I thought I was. At Hogwarts, I kept saying that I was ‘just Harry’, but I don’t feel much like ‘just Harry’. I’m not that simple anymore. I’ve got so much going on and so many things to do that being ‘just Harry’ was kind of hindering me. I mean, I’m still Harry, but he’s ‘just Harry’. Nothing special. I think I’ve finally realized that I have a lot of responsibility to my family and to others. ‘Just Harry’ is a kid without a lot of worries. I

do have those worries, those responsibilities. 'Just Harry' is a simpler version of 'Harry'. Did that make any sense at all?" He sounded quite frustrated with the idea.

"Yes," Paul said slowly. "It makes a lot of sense. I think it is safe to say that you've grown up a lot while at St. Jude's."

"That, or learned what was really important and what I could leave to other people." Harry said with a smile.

"Let's go with that idea," Paul said calmly. He studied the picture and smiled at the Harry standing in a suit, hair fixed in a fashionable way, and looking quite pleased with himself. "And this one?"

"The Potter heir," Harry said with a smile. "Remus says that I have a lot of responsibilities because of what my family used to be. They invested in a lot of businesses both in the magical and non-magical world. I always feel a little, I don't know, content when I look over the papers he has for me, or when I get a report on how well something is going for the companies. I like business for some reason. It's hard to explain."

"You're using talent that Hogwarts does not call for," Paul told him. "It's okay to feel a little smart when you're doing something for which you have discovered new talent." Paul could read through the lines of Harry's awkward speech. "Perfectly normal," he assured the boy.

"Uh, thanks," Harry said. "That one's me." He said, pointing to the last figure on the page. Paul studied and felt a smile start. This Harry looked like any other teenager, smiling at something he found intensely amusing and Paul also thought that he looked a little hungry. Typical teenaged boy, really.

"This is you, huh?" Paul squinted at the picture. "I don't know; it doesn't say 'Filthy Rich Super Powerful Wizard' to me," Paul teased.

"Ha. You're very funny, Paul. You know that, don't you?"

Harry lowered the last of his books into the carton and closed the lid. Let's see...magic books, journals, regular clothing, football, pictures, address book (THANK YOU, REMUS!!!), hairbrush, comb, toothbrush...how did I get so much stuff in one school year?

"Ready, buddy?" Paul asked from the doorway.

Harry turned and gave him a tremulous smile. "Yes and no," he answered as he closed the lid and sank down onto the bed. "I don't think I'm ready." He almost laughed. Bug and Sparky had said the same thing when they left two weeks ago.

"The real world's waiting for you," Paul said calmly. "I've taken you as far as I can. The rest is up to you."

"I know," Harry said as he pushed himself to his feet. "Thanks, Paul. 'Thanks' isn't enough, but--"

"Alright, enough of that!" Paul said with a laugh. "You did most of the work, Harry. Never forget that." Paul stepped closer to Harry and placed his hands on Harry's shoulders. "I'm very proud of you, Harry. You've done amazing work here."

Harry nodded. "Thanks," He said. He saw one of his guards poke his head into his room and then disappear. "It looks like they're ready to go, too."

"Yes. Come on, I'll help you with all of this stuff," Paul said as he gathered a few things in his arms. Harry grabbed the other one and headed downstairs where Petunia was filling out some paperwork.

"Just go ahead and put all of that into the boot, please," Petunia said without looking up from the paperwork. "I'll be done here in just a few minutes."

"Alright, Aunt Petunia," Harry led the way out to the car with one of the bodyguards trailing behind him. Note to self: Get rid of bodyguards. He and Paul loaded everything into the car and headed back into the building. Screams met their ears and they exchanged

glances. Screams weren't exactly uncommon, but they were unexpected. It wasn't until Harry heard the word "snake" that he understood. "I think someone's looking for me." He told Paul as he started down the hallway.

"Oh, not Zen!" Paul moaned as he followed Harry.

The pair found two new girls, Anna and Margaret, crouched against the wall, cornered by Zen.

"I know you know where he is! CONFESS!" Zen hissed irritably.

"Girls," Harry said to get their attention. Anna looked up. "He won't bite you. Just come over here." It took them a few seconds to creep around Zen before thanking Harry and fleeing down the hallway to safety.

"Zen, that wasn't nice," Harry said once the hallway was clear and no one but Paul and the bodyguards were around.

"Nice? What do you know about nice?! You were going to leave without saying goodbye to poor little Zen!" Harry was sure that snakes couldn't cry, but Zen was managing a fair imitation.

"I could have never left without saying goodbye to you," Harry told the little snake as he picked him up

"Really?" Zen asked.

"Really. Oh, Paul has a mouse for you," Harry said as he stroked a finger along Zen's back.

"A mousey? For me? Really?" Zen practically quivered with excitement.

"Yes, really. Why don't we get that for you now?" Harry led the way to the office.

“Here mousey, mousey, mousey!”

“You take care of yourself,” Paul said as the two of them followed Petunia out to the car.

“I will,” Harry said as he opened his door. “You, too.”

Paul nodded and pulled out a camera. “May I take a picture of you?” He asked Harry, holding up a camera.

Harry looked at Petunia for permission; she simply nodded. “I’ll take one of the two of you,” she said as she came around the car. Paul smiled and handed off the camera.

“We’re not going to get all touchy-feeling, are we?” Harry asked as Paul threw an arm around his shoulder.

“Course not,” Paul said. “I’ll just limit the kissing.”

Harry snorted as his aunt counted down. “Smile!” Aunt Petunia called out. Harry grinned at the camera as the flash went off. “Nice one!” She called out.

“Thank you, Petunia,” Paul said as he retrieved his camera. “I’ll send you copies.”

Harry nodded and climbed into the passenger seat. Paul stepped back and Harry fastened his seat belt. He and Paul waved to each other until they lost sight of each other.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Petunia said as Harry turned his attention towards the road.

“Hungry? I’m a teenager; I’m always hungry.”

“Good. We’re having spaghetti for dinner tonight.” Petunia told him.

“With meatballs?” Harry asked as the bodyguards started following in their own car.

“Of course,” Petunia answered. “Remus is coming over for dinner, too. He said something about some papers you have to sign about a quidder pitch.”

“Quidditch Pitch,” Harry corrected with a smirk.

“Yes. What’s that?” She asked in a curious tone.

“Quidditch is a wizarding sport...” The entire ride home was filled with discussion of Quidditch. Petunia sounded like a new convert when she started asking for the history of the sport.

Harry closed his closet door and smiled to himself. It was good to be home with his aunt. He would miss St. Jude’s, sure, but he was beginning to see the benefits of being home, like unlimited access to the kitchen. Aunt Petunia had mentioned something about mint chocolate chip ice cream in the freezer.

Hedwig screeched as Harry’s Mini-Messenger alerted him to a new message. “Easy, girl. It’s just parchment,” he said as he picked it up.

Dear Skywalker,

I thought you’d like to know what’s going on at Hogwarts. Dumbledore is still in the care of Madam Pomfrey, though McGonagall has said that “hopes remain high for a full recovery”.

The Daily Prophet is still forbidden, now a decree of the Ministry, but the school paper is going strong. We have a guest columnist that contributes an article about what the first war against Voldemort was like. I have my suspicions, but Drake refuses to confirm them. Git.

Ron seems quite taken with Lavender Brown...the two of them are disgusting together. I’m sure it’s all hormonal. Neville spends quite a bit of time with Luna, Ginny with Dean (and Dean’s still alive), and that’s about it in the relationship department.

Professor Zareh is jumpy as a cat. He nearly hexed Professor Sprout yesterday in the hallway when she coughed. I don't know what he's on about.

Muggles are appearing in the Hospital Wing on a weekly basis. Madame Pomfrey says that they all have been tortured with the Cruciatus Curse. I happened to walk in for something to ease my...well, never mind why I was there, but I heard the tail end of the conversation. Apparently, Voldemort's student is responsible.

I have many questions, of course. Who is he? Why is he sending Muggles to Hogwarts? Does he not realize that Apparating in and out of Hogwarts is impossible? Is he a student here? I can't imagine sitting next to Voldemort's student in class. I suppose my questions will go unanswered. I have an essay to finish, so I'll write to you later.

Love,

Mi

P.S. Victor Krum wrote to me. He's going to be in London this summer and has asked to meet me, you know, to show him around and the like. I said yes, of course. H

Harry smiled at Hermione's message and picked up his own pen.

Dear Mi,

That's great about Victor. Just let him know he'll answer to me if he does anything to you.

So, Dumbledore is going to make a full recovery? Perhaps Madame Pomfrey should keep him longer and see if she can cure him of his lemon drop addiction.

I have a feeling your anonymous columnist is none other than our favorite Potions master. You can even tell Drake I said so.

Cupid's been making the rounds at Hogwarts? Just tell Ron to keep the snogging away from my bed. I have to sleep there next year! Neville and Luna? Strange, but to each their own. Dean and Ginny?! I'm amazed Dean is still alive, but I guess that's because Ron is spending a lot of time with Lavender.

I wonder why Professor Zareh is so nervous. That's interesting. Maybe he's fighting the urge to leave. After all, it's getting to be that time of year when our Defense teachers leave Hogwarts for one reason or another.

THERE ARE MUGGLES APPEARING IN THE HOSPITAL WING?!?!
How is that possible? Hermione, you can't be stumped! I need you to explain it to me. Please come back to your senses and clarify the matter in your usual brilliant manner.

I'm home now...how strange to think of Privet Drive as home. It's bizarre. This is the place I grew up, but it's not. Different. It's more welcoming, more like home. I'm a little nervous, honestly. I don't know what's going to happen with my aunt. She seems like she's changed, but I worry that I'm going to turn around and she'll be the same as she always was. Am I worrying needlessly?

My tests are being scheduled for sometime in the coming weeks. My aunt has planned quite a few trips to London, just for fun, I think. She wants me to go with her when she goes to pick up Dudley at school. I'm not sure I want to go, because the bodyguards will have to go with us and I'm so tired of them, truth be told. We'll see what happens.

Love,

Skywalker

He hated not telling his friend everything, absolutely everything. He wanted to tell someone that he felt like his life was swallowing him whole. He sighed in discontent. He knew that his success was only guaranteed by his secrecy. Only three people knew what Harry was doing: Sensei, Khalid, and Harry himself. He couldn't afford to tell

anyone else. It's not as though you have people clamoring to know what you do at night, Potter. Quit feeling sorry for yourself.

Harry stood and went over to Hedwig. "You'd still love me, even with all of my secrets, right?" Harry asked the owl as he petted her. Hedwig nibbled his fingers and hooted. Harry smiled and scratched her head for a few more minutes before moving to the window and staring out of it. "Tom" had an appointment with his Dark Arts teacher that evening; he wasn't sure if Zareh would be able to continue the lessons. The man's nerves were worn to a thread. Dumbledore had not chosen a good spy this time; Zareh's guilt was starting to affect his performance, and Harry knew that one slip would give the entire game away to Voldemort.

Zareh lowered his wand and motioned for Harry to the same. Harry's eyebrows knit together and he frowned. "Is everything alright, William?" He asked softly as Zareh rubbed a hand across his forehead.

The man nodded and waved his hand in an absent way. Harry frowned again and moved closer to Zareh. The man just stood there with his eyes closed for a few seconds before opening them to face his student. He moved forward until he was no more than a pace away from Harry. "You don't really expect me to believe that you enjoy coming here, do you?"

Well, that's certainly blunt. Harry thought as he backed away from Zareh. How to answer this? "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Don't you?" Zareh asked. He rubbed his face again and sighed. "Look, Tom, I think you're a good kid." Zareh told him as he reached out and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You can't really enjoy coming here, taking lessons from a Dark Lord, can you?" He asked earnestly.

"You're saying dangerous things, William." Harry said shortly as he backed away from Zareh. Honestly, Harry had known that Zareh could be a little reckless, but this behavior was just dangerous. If their

Lord found out- WHAT DID I JUST THINK?! Harry turned away from Zareh and went to stare out the window to the cemetery below.

“I know people who could keep you safe,” Zareh said from directly behind him. Harry hadn’t heard the man come up behind him. He prided himself on the fact that he didn’t jump. “They have safe houses, foster families for children, everything set up. You could be a normal teenager.”

Harry closed his eyes and took a sharp breath. Yes, he would like to be a normal teenager again, but that choice was taken from him quite some time ago. He could relax at home, act like a teenager, but he wasn’t one. He knew that, Remus knew that, and even Aunt Petunia was beginning to accept the idea. Harry opened his senses and found that Voldemort was still in what Harry liked to call “The Throne Room” down the hall.

“I could easily take you away from here, Tom.” Zareh whispered to him. “You could be safe. Dumbledore would see to that.”

Harry felt a brief surge of anger at the name of Dumbledore. Yes, he had decided to leave the man alone for now, but that didn’t mean he liked Dumbledore. Mostly, he felt disappointed about having lost his illusions about Dumbledore; the man only cared for Harry when Harry was playing within his rules. Other than that, Harry was left to make his own way.

He couldn’t believe that Dumbledore allowed such an asinine person to function as a spy. He had to eliminate the man from the post. There was no way Zareh would be able to continue in this role. He cared too much for “Tom”.

“Like he kept Harry Potter safe?” He asked sharply. “No, I think not.” Harry turned around and stared at Zareh. The man was staring back at him, as though he was trying to discover how Harry knew about Harry Potter. “Do you realize what you are saying?” He breathed to Zareh. “You are speaking of treason against our Lord.”

“He’s not your lord, Tom,” Zareh said dismissively. “You’re just a kid. Let me help you.”

“I am beyond your help!” Harry snarled at Zareh. “I’ll forget all about this if you stop speaking of ‘help’.” Harry offered.

“I don’t want to leave you here to grow up into his little monster.” Zareh pulled something out of his robes and tossed it at Harry. Portkey! Harry banished it with a thought. Zareh stared at him in surprise.

“You forget yourself, Zareh.” Harry was starting to lose his temper with the pathetic spy. “Did Dumbledore send you on this mercy mission?” He growled. “Is Dumbledore trying to protect me now? Does he think me a savior, because I knew the Dark and turned away from it? Am I still a child in his eyes? Does he want to use me? My knowledge? My power? Does he want me to die for him? For the wizarding world?”

“ You don’t know what you’re saying, Tom.” Zareh almost stammered.

“ Don’t I?” Harry snapped. “I think I know all too well what Dumbledore is.” Harry fought back his anger and a plan came to his mind. He had to save Zareh from himself. He advanced on the man and grabbed his collar. “I’ll take my chances here.”

Harry started dragging Zareh towards the door. Zareh tried to pull away from him. “What are you doing, Tom?”

“Saving you.” Harry snapped as he dragged Zareh down to the Throne Room. The man struggled for a few seconds before Harry started strangling him with his collar. Zareh stopped struggling when he ran out of air. He slipped his mask back on and set his mouth in a straight line. He felt a role settling on his shoulders. He raised one hand and the doors opened with a thought.

“Child?” Voldemort asked as Harry stalked to the center of the room and tossed Zareh at the Dark Lord’s feet. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I’ve found that spy you were talking about.” Harry said as he bound Zareh with magical ropes. “He’s in league with Dumbledore and offered me protection.” The sneer came easily at the end of his words.

“Did he now?” Voldemort looked quite pleased at Harry’s words.

“Yes, sir.” Harry said. “I request your indulgence and allow me to deal with him.” Harry noticed Zareh’s eyes widen a little at the request.

“Why should I allow you such a pleasure?” Voldemort asked, but the man was obviously feeling charitable towards his student.

“He wanted to give me to a foster family. He wanted to turn me over to Dumbledore. That’s enough.” Harry told Voldemort sharply.

Voldemort stared at him for a minute, as though sizing up Harry’s motivations. “I agree. Deal with him as you like.”

“Thank you.”

Harry flicked his wand and Zareh moved to the center of the room. “Tom, don’t do this!” Zareh said breathlessly. He sounded scared. How odd.

“You forget yourself, Zareh.” Harry told him as he looked down at him. “I’m the young Dark Lord!” Harry raised his wand, focused his magic, and started playing with many levels at once. Zareh appeared to be in the greatest pain of his, screaming, foaming at the mouth, eyes rolling to stare at the back of his head. Harry knew that he was feeling only mildly confused, as though he knew something was wrong, but couldn’t care. Harry treated this as an exercise Bleyes would assign. Play with the levels of magic, control them all at once, and create an illusion that was so convincing it looked real.

The Death Eaters all drew away from the center of the room. Harry could practically taste the fear radiating off of them. He understood their feelings; he was (to all appearances) torturing a man without the need to say a spell. Harry felt the strain starting to build and he tilted his head to the side. He just needed to...there!

Zareh disappeared as Harry activated the Portkey all Order members carried to ensure their safety. He lurched forward, as though he couldn't believe what had just happened. He looked at Voldemort and allowed his anger at everything to show in his eyes.

"He was in the Order of the Phoenix, my child." Voldemort said. "They often use spells, portkeys, and other trickery to escape me. You didn't know to check. I'm not angry."

"I am." Harry told him. "May I finish what I started when the time comes?"

"All that and more, my child. Anything you wish." Voldemort came forward and rested a hand on his shoulder. "You're coming along nicely." He whispered to Harry. "Go home for now. I'll call you when I want you." He said in a louder voice. Harry bowed slightly from the waist and inclined his head towards Voldemort. Death Eaters scrambled out of his way as he left the room. Perfect.

The Order of the Phoenix was meeting again in the Great Hall. Minerva McGonagall had questioned the wisdom of continuing the meetings without Albus, but all of the representatives didn't seem upset to hear that the older wizard had taken time off for his health. So far, everyone had believed her story and no one had questioned it.

Albus was secured in the Hospital Wing under the no nonsense care of Madame Pomfrey. Minerva simply could not believe that Albus Dumbledore had taken such a far leave of his senses. He had nearly killed a student! Minerva couldn't let that happen, but she also couldn't put Albus anywhere else. He was too much of a target to put him into hospital and allowing him to take over his own care was only inviting trouble. No, it was best that he stay at Hogwarts, where more than one person could keep an eye on him. Minerva had even had a

portrait installed in his room, so that she would know how he was with only a question to the adjourning portrait. She felt terrible, turning Hogwarts into a prison for him, but it was the only option she could see.

She and everyone else was startled when Professor Zareh appeared on the floor directly in front of the Head Table. He was still wrapped in magical ropes and there was a sheet of parchment attached.

“Out of the way!” McGonagall knew about the Muggles appearing on an almost daily basis in the Hospital Wing; Zareh was the first to appear in ropes. She cast a few detecting spells over the man, and found nothing at all. A quick Finite took care of the ropes and Zareh stood up. “William, what happened?”

“The Dark Lord’s student has declined our offer of protection from the Dark Lord. After that, I’m not too clear on events.” He removed the parchment from his robe and stared blankly at it before handing it to McGonagall. “I’m afraid my position has been compromised.” He said slowly. He blinked and grimaced. “And I’ve got a touch of headache.” He said as he raised a hand to his forehead.

“That’s all I need to hear!” Madame Pomfrey appeared out of nowhere and proceeded to usher Zareh from the room.

McGonagall looked down at the parchment in her hand and studied the writing there. Her eyes widened in shock and she had to wonder on which side Voldemort’s student belonged.

Your spy was pathetic and courting death. I removed him from his position for his own safety. If there is anything you and your Order need to know, I will tell you. Keep this parchment for further correspondence.

The Order meeting broke up after Zareh had been carted off to the Hospital Wing. McGonagall returned to her office and studied the parchment. She cast every spell she could on the parchment, but other than a mild enchantment that was perfectly harmless, nothing

was wrong with it. She picked up a quill and paused before scratching out a sentence.

My name is Minerva.

She was surprised to see an answer right away.

Hello, Minerva.

Well, at least the other person said hello!

May I ask who you are?

She waited impatiently for the answer to appear. She knew some of the children these days were using tiny books that passed messages back and forth. This parchment appeared to work on much the same principle.

You may ask, but I do not have to tell you. Call me Tom if you need a name.

Tom? How interesting.

Is that your real name?

The other person paused for a few minutes before answering.

No. Is Minerva your real name?

McGonagall decided that she liked this other person. She dipped her quill into ink again.

Yes, it is, though I'm mostly called 'Professor' these days.

You must be a very smart person.

McGonagall chuckled a little.

May I ask how you created such useful parchment?

McGonagall conjured up tea and a few biscuits while waiting for the next answer.

Do you always ask permission before asking questions? I've never heard of anyone doing anything like that before. Yes, you may ask. I'll answer now. I found the spell in a book. A Charms book.

She read over the answer. This was a lot of fun and she was surprised to find herself smiling as she wrote out her next message.

Very clever, Tom. I'll have to look for that spell. Are you the same person who sent me this parchment?

She drummed her fingers as she waited for an answer. Tom was taking longer and longer to answer.

I am.

Oh, finally an answer.

Are you the Dark Lord's student?

She glared at the parchment after a full five minutes passed. She let out a sigh of relief as an answer appeared.

Yes.

Do you really enjoy being the Dark Lord's student?

The answer didn't come for almost a full minute.

Sometimes.

Minerva was surprised at the answer. She couldn't imagine any teenager enjoying the lessons Zareh described.

Really?

Oh, that had to be the stupidest question she had ever asked!

It's a challenge. Is Dumbledore still in the infirmary?

McGonagall actually jumped and stared at the paper. How had the boy known?

I have many sources about Hogwarts, just as I have sources about the Dark Lord.

The message appeared without any prompting on her part. More writing appeared and she read it with a curious eye.

I know that many people wouldn't trust me, and I honestly couldn't blame you. If I were playing the games you are, I wouldn't trust me either. I can say that I will never lie to you in matters of safety for members of your Order.

McGonagall could only gape. How?

How do you know all of this?

She smirked as the answer appeared. Oh, she liked this person.

I'm the champion.

Author's Note 2: This chapter wasn't beta-read. I wanted to get it out to you all as soon as possible, so if you see any glaring mistakes, misspellings, etc. please let me know on the forum.

NOMINATE HARRY'S NEXT ROLE! - Harry isn't going to be gone from the theater for long. Take a quick look at the forum and post your suggestion for Harry's next role. ;)

Author's Note: Wow, two updates in one day! I deserve a cookie. Thanks again to MimiTaylor, my beta. Enjoy all!

Harry buttoned his last cuff as he went downstairs to breakfast. Today was another “suit day”, as Harry was beginning to call the days he was stuck in a suit for the entirety of whatever plans Remus had made for him. He entered the kitchen and smiled at his aunt. “Good morning, Aunt Petunia.”

“Good morning, Harry,” she said as she placed a bowl of porridge in front of him.

Harry grimaced and reached for the sugar. Porridge was good, but he preferred something on it in the mornings, especially when she served it plain. Bleargh. He dumped as much sugar as possible before adding a healthy dollop of jam on top of the sugar.

“Determined to rot your teeth?” Petunia said as she sat across from him and poured out tea.

“Oh yeah,” Harry answered with a smile. “Without a doubt.”

“Mm-hm. I hope you enjoy it when you end up in the dentist’s chair.”

“Yeah. It’ll be worth it.” Harry told her as he started eating.

“Not if I tell Remus,” Petunia warned him.

“Not fair,” Harry told her with a pout. Remus was spending a lot of time over at Number Four Privet Drive and Petunia had figured out that all she needed to do was mention one of Harry’s behaviors to Remus to have that behavior changed. Harry hated it. It was like having two parents around at all hours. He had to wonder how Ron and Hermione handled it all of the time.

He and Petunia had spent a lot of time talking since he came home from St. Jude’s. He still had an appointment once a week with Paul, but he was on his own for the most part when it came to dealing with things. Life had been relatively calm for him since returning to Privet Drive.

He and Remus spent an hour or two every other day or so going over his family's business matters and what was left of the curriculum from his sixth year at Hogwarts. He and his aunt shared the chores around the house. Harry found that chores weren't so bad when someone was working with him. His aunt made a restful companion, and she had opened up a bit more about her childhood, and incidentally, Harry's mother and his own childhood.

She had produced an entire box of things she had kept from Harry's childhood. That box meant more to Harry than almost any other gift he had received. She had photographs, pictures Harry had drawn, school reports, and class work. He and Petunia had spent an entire afternoon going through that box and studying the objects Petunia had saved from Vernon. It was nice. It felt like family.

"Mail's here," one of Harry's bodyguards said from the doorway to the kitchen. Harry looked up and smiled his thanks as he accepted the packet of letters from the man.

"Thanks, Matthew."

"You're welcome. Are we still going to London, then?" he asked, pointing at Harry's suit.

"Yes, unfortunately," Harry muttered darkly. "We'll be staying there three days."

"I'll let everyone know." Matthew disappeared from the kitchen and Harry could only shake his head.

"How much longer do I need to have bodyguards, Aunt Petunia?" he asked sullenly. He didn't like the bodyguards ; he had only agreed because Petunia wanted extra protection.

"I'm not sure. I'll talk to Remus and see what he thinks of everything." She said absently as she opened the newspaper and started reading. Harry could only roll his eyes as he turned back to the mail and started sorting it into different piles of bills, Petunia's mail,

and Harry's mail. He found one letter for him. It was cream coloured parchment and held shut with a wax seal. He wondered if this particular envelope had come by owl, or through the Muggle post. He turned it over in his hands and saw the postmark. The muggle way, then. The postman must have had a laugh over the letter. It looked anachronistic, when most people used the sealing kind of envelopes.

Harry slid a thumb under the seal and broke it. He pulled out the card from within and stared. It was an invitation.

Vlad Tepes, Voivod of Wallachia

requests the pleasure of

Harry James Potter and party's

company at his summer home in the Carpathians

for the first two weeks of June to begin on June 1st.

Travel arrangements to and from England will be made for your convenience.

"Dracula invited us to his summer home for two weeks," Harry said as he handed the invitation to his aunt. He spooned some porridge in his mouth and blinked. "What?" he asked.

"Any other person would assume you'd gone round the twist, Harry. That's all." Petunia said as she gave herself a shake and looked at the invitation. "Should I hand this off to Remus, then?" she asked.

"I'd like to go, if it's at all possible." Harry told her as he discreetly dumped more sugar in his porridge. "I liked him, and it would be nice to see a bit of the world. You and Dudley will come with me, right?" he asked.

"I'm sure that can be arranged, Harry. Remus too?"

“Of course,” Harry shrugged. “Remus is my advisor. I’ll need him along for emergencies.” Harry turned back to his breakfast.

“Well, he’s on his way, so we can talk it over then.” Petunia said as she put the invitation back into the envelope. Harry nodded and pondered what it would be like to be the guest of the world’s most well-known vampire.

So, this was Smeltings? The squat brick building reminded Harry of a book he had read for literature class at St. Jude’s. Jane Eyre had been a little boring, but it was fun to compare Hogwarts and St. Jude’s to Brocklehurst School. Smeltings looked like the Brocklehurst School Harry had built in his mind.

Petunia pulled into a parking place, and Harry, Remus, and Petunia got out of the car to walk around. The bodyguards of the morning, called John and Gregory (though Harry wasn’t sure which was which), pulled up in a second car. Harry waited for them and was treated to a lecture about how he was supposed to let them get out of the car first to ensure that the area was secure. Harry promised to be a good little boy and was treated to a barely discernable snort from the other bodyguard. “Just stay close.”

“Sure,” Harry couldn’t help but think that the concerned guard took his job a little too seriously.

“This place is always a mad house.” Petunia said crossly as she picked her way through the crowd back to where Harry and his bodyguards were standing. “Why don’t you see if you can find your cousin?”

Harry nodded and moved away. He figured all of the teenagers were hiding away from the younger years and their parents. He headed for the back of the main building, tugging at his tie. He wasn’t fond of ties, but he figured things could get worse. He wasn’t sure how, though. He decided to leave the tie problem behind when his ear caught a hushed conversation.

“I mean it, Dursley!” A harsh voice snarled. “You’d better take care of whatever I send you, regardless of how your mum will feel about it. I have customers in your area.”

Harry put out a hand to hold back his guards. Harry extended his magic a bit and saw an image of his cousin pushed against the wall by a...well, Harry supposed he was a student, but he looked much more like an adult. Moreover, he was threatening Harry’s cousin with – was that a knife?

“How menacing can you look?” Harry asked his bodyguards in a whisper.

“Somewhere between ‘making an offer he can’t refuse’ to ‘want me to send him to the fishes, boss’.” One of the bodyguards said with a smirk.

“Good. Try for ‘send him to the fishes’,” Harry said with a smile. “My cousin is in trouble.” Harry stuck his hand in his pocket and conjured some tinted glasses. His guards grinned as Harry ran a quick hand through his hair, calming it. A quick flick of the wrist straightened his tie and smoothed his jacket. He felt a role settle onto his shoulders as he remembered the movie “The Godfather” he had watched with his floor. He lifted his head and turned the corner at a clipped walk.

“Dudley!” Harry said sharply. “I’ve been looking for you.” The other boys froze and Harry found it difficult not to smirk a bit.

“Who’s this, then?” the large boy (larger than Dudley) said as he spotted Harry.

“My cousin,” Dudley said softly.

“The delinquent?” the bully said in shock as he took in Harry’s tailored suit (Remus knew all kinds of handy spells) and guards at his back. Looks like Dud’s been telling stories about me.

“You should really put that knife away,” Harry said calmly as he lowered his glasses to look over the top of them at the boy. “I’m

certain it isn't allowed on school property." Harry said in a bored tone. He turned his attention to Dudley. "Your mother's looking for you, Dudley. Why don't you go find her?" Harry said as he turned his stare back to the other boy. Dudley inched out from under the other boy and scuttled around the corner.

"You're a businessman as well?" Harry asked as he put his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"You could call me that," the other boy offered.

"Your knife," Harry said calmly, "should be away."

"What are you going to do about it?" the boy asked as he slid it into a cover and stuffed it into his jacket pocket.

"I'm not the one you have to worry about," Harry said with a quick look at his guards. Harry saw one of them move out of the corner of his eye and the other boy paled.

"That gun is very impressive for a guard," the boy said shakily.

"You should see what I carry." Harry almost cackled. "Now, you're a businessman, so I'm going to talk to you like one." Harry waited for the other boy to nod before continuing. "I'm not sure what customers you have in my area, but I can assure you that they're my customers now. Understand?"

"Who do you think you are?"

"Let me put it this way, friend. You've never heard of me. You will never hear of me. No matter how many people are put away, or how many people confess, my name will never come up." Harry told him. "I'm invisible, and so is my business. I'd hate to ruin my family's perfect record."

"Record?" Did this boy never know when to quit?

“Well, no one has gone missing in a week...” Harry looked over his right shoulder and he heard the noise of a gun appearing. By the time he faced front again, the boy was running in the opposite direction. “Think he’ll tell anyone?”

“He’s a bully, sir. Bullies never tell when they’ve been beaten.”

“The name’s Harry. Nice touch with the illusions of guns.” Harry said happily as the three of them set off towards the cars. Harry collapsed onto his bed and groaned as his tired body sank into the mattress. He had no idea how tired a person could get, but he was pretty sure that he would beat anyone at that point.

His tests for Hogwarts started the next morning and then carried on for three days. He and his entourage were to report to Wizarding Examination Authority located on the sixth and a half floor of the Ministry of Magic at eight in the morning to begin Harry’s testing. Harry paused as his thoughts caught up with him. He had an entourage. He buried his face into his pillow and groaned again. Just when he thought he had adjusted to his life, something else would come up to make him feel different again. He hated it. He wished Paul was there. The two of them had an appointment on Friday. I suppose I can wait.

Harry pushed himself off the bed and went to the table. Remus had made reservations for the entire crew at a hotel just a few streets away from Diagon Alley. It was within walking distance at any rate, and Harry had a feeling that he would be walking the next few days. His aunt had plans, she had told him, plans of a shopping trip. Harry had no way out of it, so he had decided that everyone was going to suffer along with him. Dudley, the guards and Remus were all coming along. Harry could only grin evilly. Everyone always underestimated him when it came to manipulation.

Harry opened his bag and dug out his journal and a pen. He settled at the table and chewed the end of his pen for a few minutes as he thought of what he wanted to write. He tapped the page with a finger while he thought. He and Remus had met with various gentlemen that

afternoon and the entire group regaled him with stories about his father at Harry's age. He rubbed his scar and sighed.

I am not my father and I wish that people would quit comparing me to him. I'm sure he was a nice guy most of the time, but I never knew him. The comparisons don't really affect me. Getting compared to him is like being compared to Merlin. No real connection is there. It's just somebody like me. That's all. Why does everyone assume I want to hear something about my father all of the time? He's dead. Stories are nice, but they only keep me looking to the past. The past doesn't really help me today, does it? That's something to ponder.

Being home is strange. Aunt Petunia seems hesitant about something. I know she's not hesitant about waking me up. I wonder what could be bothering her. I hope she isn't tired of me already with all of these meetings and appointments. She's already said that she's going with me when I go to take my placement tests at the Ministry. I don't even know what to think about that. Is she really interested in my life, or is she doing what she has to do as a guardian? When did things get so mixed up?

I think I'll try to get some sleep tonight. I hope Voldemort does not call me. I really don't want to deal with him right now. I don't think I have enough patience to be a good little student tonight, especially since outing Zareh as the spy. Now, the Dark Lord himself is teaching me, as I am too far beyond anyone else's teaching. So I'm smart! Why must I be tortured with lessons with HIM?! I can't believe that I actually miss the essays from Hogwarts.

Harry closed his journal and dropped his head to the tabletop. He was tired. He was so very tired of it all. I can't wait until it's over.

A knock on the door made him sit up. He almost called for the person to come in when he realized that his door was locked. He shoved his journal into his satchel and went to the door. He looked out through the peephole and saw that it was Remus. "Code word?" he called through the door.

"Bond!" Remus said with a smile.

“Come on in,” Harry said as he opened his door.

“I’ve come to see if you’re ready for tonight.” Remus said as he entered Harry’s room carrying a carrier bag.

“Tonight?” Harry asked in confusion.

“Yes...we’re all going out to dinner. Did you forget?” he asked.

“Yeah, I did.” Harry said as he accepted the bag from Remus. “What’s this?” he asked, trying to find the opening to look inside.

“Your aunt’s first attempts at shopping. She bought you a new outfit.”

“Another one?” Harry asked in horror. His aunt seemed to enjoy picking out clothes for Harry, and was always recommending something for a new wardrobe. “Do I have to wear it tonight?” Harry asked.

“She’d like you to attempt it, yes.” Remus said as he brought out his wand. “Shall I clean it for you?” Remus asked.

“Yes,” Harry said as he handed the bag back to Remus and started to tug at his tie. “Throw some fabric softener in as well. She always manages to buy something scratchy.”

“Mm.” Remus didn’t say anything more as he turned away from Harry and started spelling the clothing. “Trousers.” Remus said as he tossed the pair of jeans to Harry.

“They’re called ‘jeans’, Remus.” Harry told him. Remus’ answer was only a thrown T-shirt. Harry pulled it on and then turned to the mirror to see if his hair needed fixing. “Aunt Petunia’s getting a sense of humor.” Harry said once he saw the printed message on his T-shirt.

“She is, isn’t she?” Remus asked. “Look at mine.” Remus opened his jacket and Harry had to snicker at Remus’ expense. “I howl at the

moon?" Harry laughed at Remus' expression. "What was she thinking?"

"Probably the same thing when she bought that for you," Remus said, pointing at Harry's own shirt.

"Hey, at least mine is true one hundred percent of the time!"

"Let's go, Future Actor." Remus said as he left the room. Harry only rolled his eyes, grabbed his room key, jacket, and wand, and followed Remus out the door. He only hoped that his aunt's plans for dinner wouldn't have him up too late. Eight in the morning for a teenaged boy without a constant source of caffeine would only end in disaster...or bad grades. He wasn't sure which it would be yet, or which would be worse.

Author's Note: I figured a short chapter was better than no chapter. I'm not sure when I'll be updating again. I graduate from University in May! Agh!

Author's Note: Yes, I am back

Author's Note: Yes, I am back! You are now reading the fanfiction of a person employed full-time! Woot! I start tomorrow, so I thought I'd post as a celebration. Thanks go out to Keres Weiland for looking it over.

Harry collapsed backwards onto his bed. Three days of testing for placement at Hogwarts had left him drained and wanting nothing more than sleep and rest. Honestly, how could Hermione think exams were fun? Exams are nothing more than a unique torture designed to kill off students one by one. He burrowed into the covers and pulled a pillow towards him. Tomorrow, they were off to Dracula's house for two weeks and Harry couldn't wait. He drifted off to sleep, plotting how he was going to sleep the entire way there and then maybe even take a nap. He didn't know that Voldemort would call him that night.

"Again!" Voldemort snarled as he meted out the usual punishment for Harry. The boy didn't bother wincing now. He was too tired to show signs of pain. He pulled himself up and dashed a quick hand across his face to keep the sweat from running into his eyes. He raised his wand as he faced Voldemort again.

Voldemort had called him early this evening. He had just drifted off and started relaxing when Voldemort requested his presence. Honestly, was sleep too much to ask for? Voldemort had attacked him the instant Harry had appeared and hadn't stopped since.

Harry glared as he felt another sting. "You're being too slow, Harry." Voldemort said as he motioned for Harry to take his stance.

Too slow?! We've been at this for nearly four hours! Another sting made Harry's anger erupt.

"ENOUGH!" He howled at Voldemort while flicking his wand. Voldemort flew backwards and was pinned to the wall by Harry's magic. "I HAVE HAD ENOUGH!" Harry snarled as he advanced on the struggling dark lord. He grabbed fistfuls of Voldemort's robes and slammed him back against the wall. "I am sick of this treatment! You

keep saying I'm your equal, but you treat me worse than Wormtail! I am not your toy! You can't hit me. Not again!" He held Voldemort in front of him, barely keeping himself from throttling the man.

The Dark Lord stared at Harry and then snarled "How dare you?"

Harry tightened his magic and smirked when Voldemort's air started leaving his lungs. "I dare nothing! I demand it." Harry threatened in a low voice.

Voldemort stared at him as though he didn't know the person practically strangling him and then did something so surprising that Harry released him. Voldemort dropped to his feet when Harry let him go, and doubled over in pure mirth.

Harry could only stare at him in vague unease. He had a feeling that Voldemort was now truly insane and pondered what Harry had done to make it true in fact and not just thought.

"Well done, my child. Well done indeed." Voldemort said as he straightened and took a few steps closer to Harry. "I knew you could do it. I just knew it." He said as he reached out and rested his hands on Harry's shoulders.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Harry told him.

"You're finally taking the respect you've deserved all along, my dark child. You're finally demonstrating the wizard you are. I am so very proud of you." Voldemort moved one of his hands to pat Harry's cheek. "You are coming into your own, Harry." Voldemort laid a hand on top of Harry's head in some sort of blessing.

Harry relaxed as he pulled away from Voldemort. "I suppose that you will no longer beat me?" Harry stated more than asked as he reached up and started unbuttoning his dueling robes.

"No, my young apprentice. I will not beat you again. In fact, I think it's time that you take your place at my side." Voldemort said as he wrapped an arm around Harry and started leading him out of the

Apocalypse rushing across the plains on their skeletal horses. Columns rose to meet them and lead down to the polished wooden floors. Thick carpets covered the wood and brought out the colors in the paintings that lined the wall. Harry didn't know many stories of the Bible, but he did see several, like Adam and Eve, that were easily deciphered. An ornate chandelier hung from the center of the room and gave the entire area a golden glow.

Servants appeared to take each of them to their rooms. Harry followed behind his guide, openly gawking at his surroundings. He had never seen anything like this before. There was something to catch his attention every where he looked, from the little cherub hanging in the corner to the arches, each bearing a small copy of the grand chandelier in the main hall.

Once past the main staircase, Harry was hopelessly lost. He followed the servant as closely as possible and found that he was only one floor up and down a hall. He decided that he would gawk after he knew the way to his room. The man stopped in front of a door next to a portrait of St. George slaying a dragon. He smiled and opened the door, gesturing for Harry to enter.

Harry thought that a mistake had been made. Surely this room wasn't meant for him? No, that was his luggage there. The servant stepped into the room behind Harry and motioned for Harry to follow him. He gestured around the main room. It was a sitting area with a table on one end and a desk snuggled into the corner. Harry followed him off to the right and found himself in a well-appointed bedroom complete with four poster featherbed and comfortable squashy chairs. Another gesture revealed a walk-in closet and attached bedroom. Harry wouldn't need to enter the bedroom to get dressed. Harry smiled to himself. He was going to be spoiled.

The man smiled and rearranged a book on the side table before leaving Harry alone in his rooms. Harry walked over to the table and studied the book. He was happy to see that the writing was actually handwriting and it was in English. At the top was the date and below that was a message written especially for Harry.

Welcome, Mr. Potter, to Castel Tepes

I pray that your trip from England was smooth and easy. Your presence here brings great joy into my life. My home often functions as a place for people to meet, so you may meet many different people while you are here. Do not feel at all distressed. It is just the way of things. I offer neutrality to many and those familiar with my home know that any guests of mine are under my protection.

I regret that I will be unable to meet you and your family upon your arrival. Please make yourself at home in your rooms. Yes, they are yours while you call Castel Tepes home. I will meet you all this evening for dinner in the dining room. Your manservant, called Lucian, does speak English and will come to retrieve you for dinner to show you the way.

Be at ease, Mr. Potter. If there is anything you need, you need only ask.

Vlad Tepes

Harry shook his head in bemusement and paged through the book, finding layouts of each floor. The main floor held many rooms, but the largest ones were ballroom, dining room, and sitting room. Harry had a feeling that Dracula did a lot of entertaining.

The second floor, west wing, was simply labeled as “guest rooms” and Harry’s room had a star with a “Harry’s rooms” written on it. He counted the number of rooms between his rooms and the stairs and committed that number to memory. He would not get lost between his room and the stairs. The east wing had offices, a library, and a word Harry didn’t know. He decided that he would never visit that room, just to be safe. After all, he was in a vampire’s home.

There were maps of the other floors, but nothing beyond a general marker stating that they were servants’ quarters, storage, and the like. Harry closed the book and sighed as the long trip from England started catching up to him. True, they had only been on the plane for four hours or so, but first they had to go to London, go through the airport, land in Bucharest, and then a train ride of about an hour or so, and then a car ride deep into the Carpathian Mountains. No one

would ever find Harry if they tried. It made him relax. No one would be looking for Harry in Romania.

He checked his room for a clock and found one in his sitting room. Local time was around two in the afternoon. "I think I have time for a nap." Harry said as he picked up his suitcase and carried it into his bedroom. He opened the case and dug through it looking for something to wear while he was asleep. He pulled out a T-shirt and sweat pants before disappearing into the bathroom for a few minutes to emerge ready for a kip in his new bed. He pulled the heavy curtains shut and rummaged through the pillows for the top of the coverlet. He pulled it down and crawled under it. He sighed in contentment as his body relaxed into the bed. His eyes drifted shut after a few minutes and he sank into his dreams without a thought.

Harry heard glass hit against glass and cracked open an eye. What was that noise? "Mr. Potter?" A voice said from behind him. He lifted his head from the pillow and looked around before rolling over and finding the person. "Mr. Potter, are you awake?"

"Yes?" Harry said as he pushed himself up and opened his curtains from around his bed. "I'm sorry, I'm not awake." He said after a second. He studied the person in front of him. It was a young man. If Harry had to guess, he would say that this person was in his early twenties, but closer to twenty-five than twenty. He had dark hair, but not black like Harry's own. More like muddy brown. His eyes were bright and close to a shade of blue. He was thin, but not in a scrawny way. Plus, Harry thought that this person was secretly laughing at Harry.

"My name is Lucian, Mr. Potter. I am to look after you while you stay at Castel Tepes. I've brought you something to help wake you up for dinner." He motioned to the main sitting room and Harry saw a small tea service there.

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you." Harry pondered how one got rid of a servant. He didn't want a strange person in his room while he tried to get out of bed.

“It is my job, Mr. Potter.” Lucian gave him a brief smile before disappearing into the closet. Harry leaned over the edge of the bed in time to see Lucian return with bathrobe and slippers. “Your tea is getting cold, Mr. Potter.”

“Um, I’m sorry. I’ve never...”

“Been in the position of being waited on. I was warned. Just follow my lead and we’ll both be fine.” Lucian said as he placed the slippers on the floor and stood up and held out the robe for Harry.

“I don’t think I can do that.” Harry said awkwardly. “I’m used to taking care of myself.”

“Mr. Potter, may I speak plainly?” Lucian asked.

“You don’t have to ask me.” Harry told him as he pulled on his robe.

“I was ordered to take care of you. The master does not want you to lift a finger for yourself. He wishes this to be your vacation. This requires you to relax and allow others to do for you. After all, that is what I am paid to do, and what I particularly enjoy. Do you understand that?”

“I think so. I’m just not used to it.” Harry said as he pushed back the blankets and climbed out of bed.

“You’ll get used to it faster than you think.” Lucian smiled again and gave Harry a quick wink. Harry decided that he liked this man. Lucian followed Harry into the sitting room and pulled out Harry’s chair for him.

Tea wasn’t a silent affair. It had started out that way, but Harry couldn’t stand the silence. He had finally asked Lucian to explain about the house, and Harry discovered that Lucian absolutely loved his place of employment.

“Master is only here about six months out of the year. The rest of the year is spent in upkeep. There’s a lot to do then. We check the portraits for damage, the hangings, the furniture, everything! It can get a little lonely sometimes, as it is the same people day after day, but everything changes when the master is here. People coming and going, meetings and parties. This is the best place in the summer.”

Harry heard all about the master’s (as Dracula was called by everyone employed at the house) generosity and graciousness to everyone employed there. “He paid for me to go to England to learn English at university. I never thought I’d be able to go to university. I worked here in the summers while I was studying. Now, I’m working here until the fall when I’ll take a teaching post.” Harry was surprised, but he figured an immortal vampire would need something to fill his days. Good works seemed to be Dracula’s forte.

Lucian excused himself when Harry started munching the biscuits that accompanied his tea. He disappeared into Harry’s bedroom. Harry shrugged to himself and pondered the possibility of finding the recipe for the chocolate biscuits. Would the cook give it to him if he begged? He wasn’t above that. He would beg for the recipe. He finished the biscuits (making a mental note to request some for breakfast tomorrow) and went to find Lucian. He found him in the bathroom.

“Your bath is run, Mr. Potter. I’ll lay out your clothing for the evening. I’ll be back in half an hour.” With that, Lucian disappeared from the room. Harry stared after him, bemused at having someone to run his bath water and lay out his clothes. He had an odd feeling that Lucian’s words could turn out to be prophetic; he could easily become used to this.

Harry was just tying his tie when he heard a knock and Lucian entered the room. “The master is asking for you in the sitting room.” Lucian said as he fixed Harry’s collar around the tie and looked over the suit with a critical eye. “The person that picks out your clothing does a good job.”

“My aunt,” Harry admitted with a smile, “though Remus does his fair share of picking things out.” He told Lucian.

“Mr. Lupin is your advisor, yes?” Lucian asked as he motioned for Harry to precede him out of the door. Harry liked the way Lucian led him. He walked alongside Harry and directed him with a quick jerk of his chin in the correct direction. It was much better than following someone.

“Yes, he is, but he is more like an uncle to me than anything else.” Harry admitted.

“That is good,” Lucian said. He fell silent for a few minutes until they reached the staircase. “Master is very excited to have you all here. I’m not sure why, but I haven’t seen him in such a cheerful mood since the last time he had a family reunion.”

“I don’t know either. Does he have family reunions often?” Harry asked.

“Once about every fifteen years.” Lucian said. “It always astonishes him that children grow as fast as they do.” Lucian’s face said it all. Silly vampire.

Lucian directed Harry down a short hallway and to a door. He knocked on the door, opened it, and stepped into the room. “Harry Potter, Master.” Lucian said as he gestured Harry to follow him into the room.

“Thank you, Lucian.” Dracula’s voice said. “I’ll see to him until after dinner.” Lucian nodded and disappeared out the door, which closed behind him with a quiet click. Harry looked around at the sitting room and felt that this room was definitely somewhere he could spend a few hours. It reminded him of the Gryffindor sitting room and he felt his shoulders ease even more.

“Mr. Potter,” a very satisfied voice said from the dark corner. Harry turned to face it and saw Dracula emerge from the darkness. “I’m so

glad you've come to visit me." He left the shadows and lifted a hand for Harry to shake.

"Thank you for inviting me, as well as my family, sir. It is an honor." Harry said as politely as he could manage. It still boggled his mind a bit, being in Dracula's house.

"It was nothing. You are doing me the favor, Mr. Potter."

"Please, sir. Call me Harry?" He requested. He wasn't sure how to go about this, but he couldn't stand two straight weeks of being called 'Mr. Potter'.

"Only if you agree to call me Vlad," Dracula said. "It is what my friends call me." Harry's mind threatened to go off track again, but he merely smiled and agreed. "I apologize for not meeting you when you first arrived. I was detained with some rather disagreeable business men."

"It's alright. I wasn't very fit company. I'm afraid I took a nap after arriving."

"You are here for vacation. You may nap whenever and wherever you like." The newly named 'Vlad' said. "I wouldn't recommend the barns. They are restful, but the horses sometimes make noise."

"I think I'll stick to my room." Harry said truthfully.

"Or the verandah. I've been known to fall asleep there myself."

"Doesn't the sun hurt you?" Harry asked without thinking. "Sorry. That was rude."

"I don't think idle curiosity is rude. No. I am weaker in the sun, without some of my more impressive abilities. Almost completely human, some would say. I burn quite a bit if I'm not careful, but I do enjoy sunbathing almost as much as the next person." Vlad told Harry.

“Now, would you like something to drink?” Vlad asked as he moved to a small stand on the other side of the room. “Please, sit down.”

Harry chose a chair and lowered himself into it. “Um, what would you recommend?” Harry asked.

“Hmm.” Vlad stopped and considered the several bottles on the stand. “This, I think.” He said, pouring something into a glass. “It is more fruit juice than alcoholic.” He said as he poured a glass for himself and carried the two over towards Harry. He offered Harry one glass and then sat in a chair across from Harry. He sipped his own glass and smiled to himself.

Harry took a tentative sip of his own glass and nearly bolted it all. “This is really good!” He told Vlad.

“I thought you might like it.” Vlad said. “Do you ride?” He asked in the next second, as though a thought had just occurred to him.

“I’m afraid not.” Harry answered. “Unless you count broomsticks, hippogriffs, and threstrals.” Harry said honestly.

“Hmm. Perhaps not the broomstick, but riding a horse is very close to the other two.” Vlad told him. “I’ll arrange some lessons for you and anyone else that cares to try, if you would like to learn.”

“That would be wonderful.” Harry said honestly.

“Good.” Vlad nearly purred. “I hope that you and your family will enjoy yourselves here. I would like to show you a bit of the country tomorrow, if you’re willing.” Vlad said.

“I’m sure my aunt would like that.” Harry said.

“Oh, I’ve already arranged for her and the others to take a driving tour of their own. I would like to spend some time with just you, if you don’t mind me taking over your time.”

Harry smiled a little and laughed. "Knowing my aunt, she'll want to go into the first shop she sees and the rest of the group will be bored while she shops." Harry told Vlad. "I'd be more than happy to miss that!"

"Good, tomorrow morning then, after your riding lesson." Vlad finished off his glass and sat staring at it. Harry took the time to look around the room. It was a comfortable room done in soft shades of green and cream. There were books in a bookcase to his left and he instantly thought of Hermione drooling over them. He could tell that some of the books were extremely old. Small windows allowed a bit of light in through the shades covering them. The rest of the furniture told Harry that this was indeed the sitting room. Two and three chairs were grouped together. Some were gathered around a tiny table, and others were just set close together. One table held a chess game in progress and Harry studied the patterns to see if he could figure out a move for one of the pieces.

"I wonder why I smell dark magic on you, Harry."

Harry looked up to see Dracula studying him. "You can smell that?" Harry demanded.

"Oh, yes. Why?" Vlad asked.

"I don't think now is the time to discuss it." Harry said honestly. "Some time tomorrow?" He offered.

"That's fine." Vlad said. "It worries me."

"I'm fine." Harry said as a light silvery bell sounded in the hallway.

"Ah, dinner." Vlad said happily. "Let's go meet your family...and the werewolf."

"Is that a problem?" Harry asked as he stood and followed Vlad to the door.

"You collect strange friends, Harry. Vampires, werewolves."

“Metamorphagi, house elves, and outcasts.” Harry said more to himself than to Vlad. “I accept people on their merits, rather than their labels.” Harry said.

“Good. You should enjoy yourself while you are here, then.” Those words sounded as though they had something behind them, but they entered the dining room and Harry felt himself intimidated again. The dining room was a large with a table long enough to bring grand dinner parties to his mind. He had been forced to read *Pride and Prejudice* for English class at St. Jude’s and discovered the idea of balls to be a rather annoying subject that caused sighs of longing from girls. He never wanted to attend another affair even remotely similar to the Yule Ball.

“Harry, there you are!” His aunt said. “Mr. Tepes, I must compliment your home.” She said as she turned to Dracula.

“I hope your rooms are comfortable?” He asked her. He took one of her hands in his own and smiled.

“Oh, quite.” Petunia reassured him. Dracula smiled and guided Petunia’s hand to the crook of his arm to lead her to the table. Harry had a fair idea of how Dracula had managed to receive such a reputation as a dashing and charming creature...he practically oozed it.

“Is it just me, or does Remus look a little jealous?” Dudley’s voice whispered in Harry’s ear.

“I’m not going to think about it,” Harry said flatly. “It’s a disturbing thought. The more pressing matter, Dudley, is how we get him to teach us how to do that.”

“I agree,” Dudley said solemnly. “Mum would agree to almost anything; I can tell by looking at her.”

“That is the point.” Dracula said as he popped up next to Harry. “And yes, I will teach you my little secrets...if you’re good and eat

your vegetables.” Harry and Dudley looked at each other at seeing Dracula clear on the other side of the room, still charming Petunia.

“Did you...?”

“Let’s not think about it, Dudley. I’m not sure my brain can take much more this evening.” Harry told him as Dracula motioned the two boys to their seats. Remus smirked at Harry and Dudley as they sat down. “What?” Harry asked him.

“It’s nice to see that some things can still surprise you, Harry. That’s all.” Remus said as an entire squad of servants descended on the room and brought food and drink to the table.

Some things were easily recognized. Harry saw several different types of bread and plain vegetables. Other things, however, he could not recognize no matter how he squinted. A man at his shoulder poured some of the same drink he had earlier, as well as ice water and something he didn’t know. Dudley gave him a quick look, as though he thought Harry had all of the answers, but Harry could only shrug at his cousin. He didn’t know what half the food was either.

The servants disappeared as quickly as they came and Harry couldn’t help but wonder if Lucian would be able to explain everything on the table. He gave a quick glance at Dracula and froze. The man was watching him. “The children look perplexed.” He said with a speculative air.

“More than perplexed.” Harry offered. “I don’t mean to sound rude, but...”

“What is all of this?” Dracula finished for him. Harry nodded and the man smiled. “I thought to introduce you all to some of the dishes you’ll experience during your time here. After all, why travel and then eat the same thing you do at home?” He directed this question more to Petunia than to the boys and Petunia nodded in agreement.

“That is what I have been telling the pair of them. They need to experience more things than just the everyday.” Petunia said.

“Who is she and what has she done with your mother?” Harry whispered to Dudley. Dudley only shrugged.

“Now,” Dracula’s voice called Harry’s attention back to the table. “Romanian cuisine is a mix of many different backgrounds, and I should know. Greek, Turkish, German, Russian have all had some influence on our meals, but I think that makes everything better, yes?” What followed was a lecture about Romanian cuisine that made Harry wonder exactly how much time Dracula had on his hands. The minute detail about every dish, preparation, and tradition from which it originated was presented, as well as fun facts about famous people Dracula had met and what their opinions of the dish had been. Whatever it was, the topic kept the entire table occupied and entertained for the majority of the meal, only verging into plans for the next day with the arrival of dessert.

After dessert, Harry followed Dracula back to the sitting room while his family and advisor were returned back to their rooms. Dracula motioned for him to sit again and studied Harry for a few minutes before shaking his head. “About the dark magic on you?”

Harry relaxed back into his chair and pondered how much of a lie he was going to get away with. “You’re not.” Dracula said flatly. “The truth, if you please.”

“Mind-reading?” Harry asked, almost surprised that the vampire would use such things on him.

“It is difficult to keep you out when you are thinking loudly.” Dracula told him. Harry could only blink. He was sure that made sense to other vampires. How did one think loudly? “You are doing it now.” Dracula said.

“Creepy.” Harry said.

“Indeed. Now, the magic.”

“You can’t tell anyone else.” Harry told him.

“I don’t intend to do so.”

“The Dark Lord has a student. I am that student.” Harry shrugged.

“Explain.” The slight growl that accompanied that word told Harry that Dracula was not pleased with what he had heard.

“Oh, Papa. Leave the boy alone. He is doing the best he can.” A slightly bored voice said from the shadows. The figure there walked forward and smiled at Harry. “Hello, little magus.” Khalid Haven had arrived at Castel Tepes.

Author’s Note 2: Yes, “castle” is not spelled right for the English word. I looked up the word in the Romanian dictionary. Please do not send reviews telling me it is spelled wrong.

Author's Note: And here we go again! NOTE: This chapter has not gone through the beta. I didn't want to make you all wait any longer, so I just posted. Please let me know of any mistakes in the forums! ;)

"Papa?" Harry asked in surprise. Khalid and Dracula were related?

"I raised Khalid after his parents' deaths," Dracula answered Harry's unspoken question. "He became a vampire by one of my former friends." Dracula rapped his claws on the side table. Former. Oh.

"No masks, little magus. He can know." Khalid moved over to Harry and ran a hand over Harry's hair. "You can tell him." Harry leaned back in his chair and batted Khalid's hand away. Harry had discovered that Khalid enjoyed bestowing physical affection on his friends, and would often invade personal space without so much as a "by your leave." Most of the time, it was okay, but now, he wanted to think without Khalid petting him.

Dracula reached out and refilled Harry's drink. He was obviously giving Harry time to think without "listening in" on Harry's thoughts...or so Harry thought.

"Voldemort and I share a mental connection. No one knows how it happened, or why, but it exists. He invaded my dreams and started...I don't know what to call it. He kept offering me the usual things, you know, power, and respect, anything I wanted, so long as I joined him. Then he offered me equality, equality to him. I said no. He offered again, and again. Repeatedly. Finally, he quit taking 'no' for an answer. He started teaching me. I gave in. It was easier than dealing with his anger. I concocted a persona and appearance to keep suspicion away from me and on a boy that didn't exist. I mean, can you imagine the headlines? 'Boy-Who-Lived is Boy-Who-Betrayed!' It's better that no one knows. Well, now you, Khalid, and Sensei Leonard know. That's it." Harry reached out and took his glass. This fruity drink was good. He wondered if he could get some to take home with him. It would be nice at Hogwarts after a long day.

"Did he hurt you?" Dracula asked.

“Physically? Yes.” The growl from both vampires was simultaneous. “It wasn’t bad, nothing I couldn’t heal.” Harry heard Khalid snort from behind him.

“The little magus is not being entirely open about his ‘lessons’, but it is an adequate explanation.” Khalid helped himself to the fruity drink, as Harry thought of it. “Yes, he has been hurt, but he will survive, as he always does.”

“But the purpose!” Dracula demanded, his hands banging off the armrests of his chair. “What is the purpose? Why go through such things?”

“I learn a lot. I am learning more than magic. I’m also learning his plans, his tactics, his thought processes. I’m able to predict what he will do, in almost any situation. I can help his victims right away, should they require it, keep truly awful things from happening, things like that.”

Dracula frowned at Harry and sighed before relaxing back in his seat. He folded his hands in his lap and studied Harry. “I cannot convince you to stop?”

“No. Not until it is finished.”

“Ah. I suppose all I may do is offer you sanctuary here, should you need it.” Harry smiled, knowing he had won this argument. “You will take care?”

“Every care I can take without arousing his or another’s suspicion.” Harry promised.

“Very well,” Dracula conceded. “You will let me know if my new friend needs help?”

“Of course.” Harry finished off his fruity drink and allowed Dracula to refill it.

“When you say it, what do you mean?” Khalid asked from the corner. Khalid liked to hover in strange places, like corners, dark spaces, rafters, well, anywhere from which he could surprise someone. So many of the vampire stereotypes must come from Khalid. He certainly seems to enjoy himself.

“I mean when Voldemort is defeated, the war is over, and I can go back to being ‘just Harry’.” Harry sank back into his chair and closed his eyes.

“The headaches you’ve had...they are becoming worse?” Khalid said more than asked.

“How did you know about those?” Harry asked. He hadn’t told anyone about them. Not Paul, not Hermione, not even Aunt Petunia or Remus!

“I can tell,” Khalid set down his glass on the end table and stalked towards Harry. “The headaches, the dreams, the tense shoulders, everything points to some stressor, something you’re keeping from us.” Khalid paused and tapped one finger on his lips. “I wonder what that is.”

Harry looked up at Khalid and shook his head. “That would be telling.” He picked up his glass and finished off his fruity drink again.

“And you should tell us,” Dracula commented. “Just in case.”

Harry looked between the two vampires and held out his glass. Khalid and Dracula shared a look and Dracula refilled Harry’s glass.

“What do you want to know?”

The bed curtains slid back and Harry winced away from the light. “Ugh,” Harry moaned, trying to bury his head among the pillows without his headache blossoming into an explosion.

“Harry? You should have been up some time ago.” Lucian said as he maneuvered a breakfast tray closer to the bed.

Harry pulled the blankets over his head and groaned again. "Lucian, do me a favor? Just take my head off at the shoulders."

"Er, why?" Lucian asked, trying to find Harry under the blankets.

"Not so loud." Harry whined, batting Lucian's hands away from him.

"Did you have a fruit drink last night?" He asked, refraining from wagging his finger. He decided to save his scorn for the master. Honestly, giving a boy alcohol of that level.

"Um, yeah." Harry said in a whisper.

Lucian rolled his eyes and swore. "Just stay right there." Lucian said. He turned away from Harry and went to the bathroom. He found the aspirin and returned to the bedroom. He shook out two pills and held them out. "Painkillers for that monstrous headache I'm sure you have."

"Not moving." Harry grumbled.

"Okay. I'll just leave you to suffer then." Lucian moved to put the pills away when he saw one of Harry's hands emerge from the blanket. He placed the pills in Harry's hand and held out the cup of tea. Harry emerged long enough to take the painkillers and then sank back into his bed.

"I'm going to leave you some water. Make sure you drink it. You're dehydrated, and that's why you feel as though your head is tap dancing. I'll inform the master you're unwell."

"Kay." Harry promptly disappeared under the blankets again. Lucian shook his head and went off in search of Dracula. He stormed down the stairs and found the vampire in the main entryway, talking to a beady little man and making large gestures with his hands.

"We'll want it big, just so, around the chandelier. It would lead into the ballroom, naturally, and go around the circumference of the

room.” Dracula said as Lucian approached. “How is he this morning, Lucius?” he asked, completely nonchalant at the literally ‘ticked off’ expression Lucian was wearing.

“HE is dosed with painkillers and attempting to sleep off whatever you gave him last night. Master, I am rarely exasperated with vampire ways, but why are you subjecting him to the fruity drink? I thought you liked him!”

“And so I do, Lucian. I just needed to ensure that he would be in one place for most of the morning while plans are made.” Dracula signed something on the beady man’s clipboard and waved him away. “I have many things to do at the moment, Lucian. Do inform me when he is feeling better.” With those words, Dracula was gone.

“Stupid vampires!” Lucian muttered to himself before returning to Harry’s quarters. Lucian stopped halfway up the stairs. “WHAT PLANS?” he bellowed, knowing that Dracula would hear him, no matter his location in the castle. He descended into annoyed muttering and went down to the kitchen to let them know that Harry would not be joining everyone for breakfast and to arrange a tray for mid-morning, on the hope that Harry would be awake by then.

“You are planning this party without his knowledge, Papa. That will not set well with him.”

“He needs to start meeting people in our circle. It’s close to his birthday; what better way to celebrate such an event than by holding a party?”

“A formal party. A ball. Does he even know how to dance?” Khalid shoved the menu away from him. “He doesn’t care for that particular meal. Try something else.”

“Hmm. Perhaps a roast?” Dracula shook his head. “Could you ensure that the cook makes a final approval of this? I’m sure she wouldn’t like me treading on her territory.”

“Certainly, Papa. You may want to mention your plans to him at some point.” Khalid gathered the papers in front of him and stood from the table.

“Thank you, Khalid. I’ll take your thoughts into consideration.” Khalid nodded to his father and disappeared.

Dracula turned back to the invitation design in front of him.

Vlad Tepes, Voivod of Wallachia

requests the pleasure of

your company at his summer home in the Carpathians

on 12 June for his annual Summer Gathering.

Dancing RSVP

“Very nice,” He said to himself. “Very nice indeed.”

Harry slept on, blissfully unaware of anything going on in the castle. He woke somewhere around ten am, still a little pained behind the eyes, but able to sit up under his own power. He gave a little moan and started the long process of getting out of bed. Before he could so much as throw back the blankets, Lucian appeared and started fussing, all the while muttering about stupid vampires.

“Hi, Lucian.” Harry said softly, mindful of his head.

“Feeling better?” Lucian asked as he held out Harry’s robe. Harry allowed Lucian to assist him as he got out of bed and swayed on his feet.

“A bit. Head still hurts a little.” Harry admitted.

“By the time you’ve eaten and got something to drink in you, the headache should disappear. Let’s get you into the shower.”

“Sounds brilliant.” Harry was so much out of it that he didn’t mind that Lucian was the one that started the water and helped him with his pajamas. Harry only cared about the water and how good it felt. I am never drinking again. He vowed to himself.

Harry managed to finish his shower without any major mishaps and wrapped his bathrobe around him. He paused to look in the mirror and had to do a double take. He looked horrid, but there was also a surprise waiting on him. He found hair on his upper lip. When did that happen? He stared at himself. I’m going to need Remus to teach me how to shave. On second, thought, a shaving spell. I think.

He stopped long enough to pull on his underclothes, knowing Lucian probably had set out his clothing for him while he was showering. Harry entered his room and was accosted by a tiny little man wielding a tape measure.

“Ah, Harry. Up on the stool, if you please.” Dracula said pleasantly while paging through a booklet.

“What’s going on?” He asked as he stepped up.

“Just some measurements.” Dracula said absently.

“Measurements for what?” Harry asked as he allowed the man to wrap the tape measure around him.

“Just indulge an old vampire, would you?” He said, paging through a catalogue of some sort. Harry couldn’t read the language, so he gave a mental shrug and allowed the little man to do his work.

Lucian entered the room with a tray, stopped, and glared at Dracula. “I thought you were going to do this AFTER his breakfast.”

“It won’t take long.” Dracula said calmly. “You’ll be able to feed him, Lucian, do not worry so much.” Lucian only snarled at the vampire before ducking out of the room. Harry heard him slamming around in the sitting room and he wondered if any of the priceless valuables (he

guessed they were priceless; they looked extremely old) were in danger from Lucian's temper.

"Thank you, I am finished." The man said as he slipped from the room.

Harry stood on the stool for a moment more before stepping down from the stool. "Thank you, Harry. Are you still up for a drive today?"

"That sounds great." Harry admitted. "What was all this about?"

"I have no idea." Dracula said lightly. "See you in about an hour, Harry." With that, the vampire disappeared.

Lucian came back into the room and looked around. "Left, did he?"

"Yes. Do you know what's going on?" Harry asked Lucian as the man disappeared in Harry's closet.

"I'm afraid not. It's easier to give in, but not much fun." Lucian admitted. "Slacks and shirt, I think." Lucian said to himself. He laid out Harry's clothes and nodded to himself. "Breakfast is waiting for you in the sitting room. Best to hurry."

"Ah, Petunia! A moment of your time before you leave?" Dracula asked, sliding up to her. Petunia startled, but recovered quickly. She had found that dealing with the vampire was much like dealing with her nephew. Strange things would happen, and it was easier to accept them and move on, rather than becoming upset.

"Yes? What can I do for you?" Petunia asked as the vampire took hold of one of her hands and wrapped it in his own.

Dracula turned and started to lead Petunia away from the group near the car. "Dudley just had a birthday, and now Harry's birthday is approaching, am I correct?" Dracula said more than asked.

"That's right. Harry's birthday is on the thirty-first of July."

“I was wondering if you, Dudley and Remus would enjoy helping me plan a party for him to take place next weekend. It would give him a chance to be introduced to society, upper society, if you understand my meaning. He has a very important place to take, and better that he be introduced to all of that here, among friends, than be thrust into it by someone less than desirable.”

“I think that is a fine idea!” Petunia agreed. She and Remus had talked about Harry throwing a party for his seventeenth birthday. Remus said that Harry’s business partners already planned one, but Petunia felt Harry would far more enjoy a birthday with his friends, much like Dudley’s birthday parties, than with stuffy old men. “What did you need help with?”

“Oh, a few things. I’ll have a list delivered to your room later. For now, I believe that I am keeping you from your tour. I’ll take good care of Harry today while you are out. I plan to show him some sights of the surrounding countryside. You are planning on shopping, yes?”

“That’s right. Dudley’s found something to occupy himself...Remus and I are going out and about to see what the town has to offer.” Petunia eagerly told him.

“Then I shall leave you to your day.” Dracula bowed low over her hand before disappearing.

“He’s such a nice man.” Petunia sighed to herself before joining Remus

Harry settled back into the car seat and smiled at his host. Dracula nodded and tapped a finger on the driver’s shoulder. The man shifted the car into gear and pulled away from the house. “So, where are we going?”

“The little town down the road here. The locals call it ‘Tepes’.”

“I can see why.” Harry said.

“Mm, yes.” Dracula gave Harry another grin and then launched into the history of the town. Harry watched the scenery pass, asking a question here or there. His knowledge of Romanian history was woefully inadequate to keep up with everything Dracula was saying. I should look up some history this evening after dinner.

“I’ll have Lucian bring up some books from the library for you.” Dracula’s voice broke Harry from his thoughts.

“Thank you,” Harry saw something and turned back to his host. “The church looks very old.”

“Yes. It is around four hundred years old. The original was damaged in a fire, so this was built.” Dracula leaned forward. “Do you see the carvings there? You see the story?”

“Adam and Eve?” Harry guessed, seeing what he thought was a person hiding behind a plant of some kind.

“Correct. Many people could not read when this church was built. They read the stories through pictures.” Dracula moved back to allow Harry a better view. “Ah, there is something you do not see everyday.” Dracula motioned to a wizened man sitting in the doorway of a house. He was playing a violin. “A musician that plays for the pure joy of it.” The car slowed to a stop and Dracula lowered the window. A lively little tune reached Harry’s ears and he found himself smiling. “I believe this song is about a girl with two beaux.”

“Sounds as though she is going back and forth between them.” Harry said after a moment of listening.

“That is exactly what she is doing.” Dracula said. The window went back up and the car moved forward. “How would you like to see the market place?”

Harry nodded and the car turned past the streets towards the center of town. It stopped and the driver opened the door. He handed a basket to Dracula. “We’ll pick up a few treats here that the cook said I shouldn’t serve to boys.” Dracula left the car and led Harry to the

marketplace. "I always enjoy coming here. Most of the vendors pretend they don't know me, which makes everything a nicer experience."

"I understand," Harry said. "Believe me, I understand."

Dracula only chuckled and threw an arm around Harry's shoulders. The marketplace held a little bit of everything and Dracula cheerfully translated what everyone was saying as each displayed his wares. He bought a few things that Harry recognized, like sweets, and a few things Harry was unsure of, but figured he could try everything at least once. A few small bottles joined the basket and Dracula beckoned Harry closer to the woman at that particular stall.

"Harry, this is Mama Anica. She is the oldest woman in these parts. She wishes to say hello to you." Dracula placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and guided Harry to stand in front of the woman. She peered at Harry and gave a toothless grin before reaching up an arthritic hand to pat his cheek. She garbled some words at Harry, patted his shoulder, and abruptly turned away.

"Let's go have our picnic now." Dracula said, leading Harry away.

"What did she say?" Harry asked.

"Oh, just that you are a handsome young man...and that you have much ahead of you."

"Is she a seer?" Harry asked, almost stopping to look behind him.

"You know, we're never sure. We prefer to say that she is wise." Dracula led the way back to the car. Harry could only shake his head and follow his host.

Harry reclined against the pillows and stared up at the sky. Clouds drifted over his head and he felt perfectly relaxed. Of course, the light wine Dracula had offered him might have something to do with that relaxation. He had only had one glass, but it was a nice complement to the lunch they had shared. Well, demolished would be the better

term. The sandwiches were gone, as well as the little cakes Dracula had bought at the market. There was still some fruit left, and Harry was slowly making large dents in that offering. Harry reached out and found another little bunch of grapes.

“You look content.”

“I am content,” Harry admitted. “This is relaxing.”

The two of them lapsed into silence and Harry allowed his eyes to drift shut. They listened to birdsong for fifteen minutes or so before Dracula cleared his throat. Harry opened one eye and looked up at Dracula. The vampire was looking down at Harry with a funny look on his face. He appeared to be thinking about something particularly engrossing.

“You have to kill him, don’t you?”

Harry didn’t have to ask Dracula what he meant.

“Yes, I have to kill him.” He admitted softly.

Dracula only nodded, as though he had already known. He stood and pulled Harry to his feet. He motioned for Harry to follow him. “I have something to show you, my friend.”

Dracula led the way through the scrawny trees to a huge field. “How much do you know of my history?”

“Only what you’ve told me, and things I’ve heard.” Harry admitted.

“When I was a young man, still mortal, I was the equivalent of a lord or prince. It’s difficult to give a proper definition. I was responsible for the welfare of everyone in my province. Those were different times, harsher times. This veneer of civility I present today is a new development. I used to be a very harsh man.”

“My country was a region surrounded by two strong empires. On one side, the Hungarians, and the other, Ottoman Turks. I spent

some time as a 'guest' of the Turks, four or five years, I think. They even helped me to power, believe it or not. I was only seventeen or eighteen years old."

"I'm sure you already know of all the gory atrocities I committed. By today's standards, I am aware that they seem barbaric, disgusting and shameful. I have no excuses to offer. Know only that I understand that sometimes one must do what is distasteful in order to accomplish something greater than oneself. To protect my people, my lands, I had to become brutal, feared, and abhorred. Blood became a common sight."

Dracula looked out over the field. "Out there, men died by the thousands. I led them to their deaths. I killed many with my own hands. I can still feel their throats giving way, their bodies momentarily stopping my blade, and then yield. To watch the life light fade from their eyes, it is a terrible and wonderful thing. This massive strength called life, to disappear in an instant, is frightening. So fragile in that strength.

Dracula stepped closer to Harry and rested a hand on his shoulder. Harry looked up at the man. "I know what you must do. Moreover, I know why."

Harry stared at the vampire, unable to say anything. Dracula's lips twitched and he pulled Harry to him.

"As long as you and I live, Magus, you have a home with me."

"Thank you," Harry said into Dracula's coat. "Thank you."

Author's Note/Disclaimer: I make no guarantees of accuracy regarding Vlad Tepes or his actions. I did research, but there are many different sources of Vlad Tepes, who he was, and what he was really like. Many of them contradicted each other. I did my best with my limited time and patience.

Author's Note: Here we go again!

Harry's time with Dracula changed after the conversation at the battlefield. He became more relaxed around the vampire and more open about things. Lucian often found Harry in Dracula's private sitting room, chattering away on one topic or another. Dracula himself spent their time together teaching Harry what it meant to be a leader. The boy didn't realize it, of course, but a comment here and there seemed to affect Harry.

Three days after their talk, Harry was curled up in his new favorite chair, a knitted blanket surrounding him, and Dracula studying the books he had called for earlier in the evening. "Ah, here it is." He said, pulling out a slim volume. "You see, Harry, people look to leaders on how to act. As such, it is important to know how to act in any situation. This book is important for you to read.

Harry accepted the book and opened it to the title page. "A Young Gentleman's Guide?"

"Yes, a book of etiquette. Your aunt has done a fine job so far, but there are situations she may not have experienced." Dracula tapped the book. "You most certainly will experience new situations."

"I don't plan on much of a fancy social life." Harry admitted.

"Well, you never know. Parties happen." Dracula said lightly. He felt a little relieved when Harry didn't say anything.

The clock started chiming the hour and Harry looked up. "I should get to bed." Harry said. "I'll be sure to read this book." Harry stood and Dracula gave him a quick squeeze around the shoulders.

"Good night, Magus."

"Good night, Vlad. I'll see you after my riding lesson?"

"I have some business that will keep me until lunch time; I will join you and your family for lunch."

“Sounds great.” Harry said as he left the room.

Dracula watched as Harry walked down the hallway. The boy could be oblivious sometimes, and for that, Dracula was grateful. “Surprises await you, little magus. I don’t think you now what fun is to be had.”

Harry groaned and rubbed a hand on his forehead. He rolled out of bed and stumbled into his closet. “Alright, I’m coming! Stop it!” he hissed as the steady throbbing increased in strength. He changed into trousers and a button-up shirt. He ran his hand through his hair a couple of times to calm the madness and summoned his cloak and mask. He paused long enough to look in the mirror to change his appearance. He slid his mask on and hissed his password.

He reappeared in the cemetery and slipped through the mists towards the house. No other Death Eaters were about in the hallways. He paused and wondered where Voldemort could be. He heard a door open somewhere to his right. Harry wandered down the hall and ducked into the room.

“Hello, Tom.” Voldemort said. “Come here.”

“Good evening, sir,” Harry said as he stopped next to Voldemort.

“Robinson!” Voldemort called. A Death Eater melted out of the group gathered in the corner. “Tom, this is Robinson. Robinson, my student, Tom.” Robinson offered his hand to Harry. “You’ll be accompanying Robinson on his raid this evening, Tom. It’s time you learned what we do on raids. Make sure you stick with Robinson. No spells from you this evening except shields.”

“Yes, sir,” Harry said.

“Death Eaters,” Voldemort raised his voice. The congregated wizards turned to him. “Go to the portkey point. Tom will join you there.”

Harry waited while the group left the room. “I’m going on raids now?”

“It is a vital part of your education,” Voldemort answered. “Raids of this level are considered low-risk. Nevertheless, you must stay close to Robinson. Do not do anything you are not told. Come back to me safely.”

“Yes, sir.” Harry said, giving a sharp nod and turning on his heel.

“Good luck, Harry.” Voldemort said softly after the disappearing figure.

Harry joined the Death Eaters outside. “Stay close, young Lord.” Robinson said to him as he spotted Harry.

“Certainly.” Harry said as the portkey appeared. Harry and the Death Eaters all touched the portkey. Harry felt the hook behind his navel and he managed to keep his feet when they landed. “Where are we?”

“Some Muggle town.” Harry nodded and followed Robinson to a house. “Havoc and mayhem, gents.” He said to the other Death Eaters. They split off into pairs and started choosing their own houses.

What do I do? How can I help? Harry glanced around the house as they entered. A pile of mail on the table told him where they were. The Death Eaters were attacking a little town called Eastwick. Now, how to let the Order know about it? Harry felt hopelessness well up in his chest and he pushed it down. What would Bleys do? What would he say? No limits. That’s right! No limits!

Harry heard the first screams shatter the night and he allowed his eyes to slide shut in preparation as he was pushed behind the Death Eater with Robinson. Magic, his magic, gathered. YES? YES? WHAT? WHAT DO YOU NEED?

FOOL THE DEATH EATERS! He ordered the magic. He felt it spread out and a mass illusion fell over the town. Harry reached out one tendril of magic towards his belongings in his suite at Dracula’s house

and found the paper he was using to contact McGonagall. He hoped Lucian wasn't in his room as the pen started moving.

Champion here. There is a Death Eater attack happening at Eastwick. Ten Death Eaters, and me. Send someone soon.

He returned his full attention to the attacks, to brush against each Death Eater's mind to discover which spells they were going to cast, and then create an illusion that they could both feel and experience at the same time.

This act of magic was like juggling in no gravity. His attention was split in several different directions at once, so he had no attention left for his immediate surroundings. Screams continued, but no one was screaming. The Cruciatus curses continued, but no one felt pain. Muggles died, but their hearts continued to beat. No one noticed the sweat running down Harry's forehead or the shaking in his limbs. You have no limits to your magic, child, so long as your physical strength will hold out. Harry continued until he felt the whispers of unconsciousness slide around his ears. I just have to hold on until...

His legs collapsed and he dropped to his knees as he heard the sounds of Apparition. Finally.

"Young lord?" Robinson turned away from the Muggles and dropped to a knee in front of Harry. "What is wrong?"

"I've been ill, Robinson." Harry rasped out. "Just ill." The door slammed open as the Order poured into the house. The other Death Eater started to leap for the back door, but stopped and grabbed Robinson. Harry felt Robinson try to grab him, but Harry was nothing but dead weight, and the second Death Eater dragged Robinson away.

Harry pushed himself up against the wall and tried to stand. Why do I continue to let things like this happen? He looked up as Tonks and Zareh came into the room. Tonks rushed towards the Muggles and Zareh approached Harry, his wand ready and pointing straight at Harry's head.

“The Muggles are unharmed.,” Tonks said. “Just a little confused.”

“Good. This one doesn’t look too good.” Zareh said, gesturing at Harry.

“You are no ray of sunshine yourself, William,” Harry rasped out in Tom’s accent. “Particularly when you have not had your tea.”

“Tom?” Zareh said in shock. “Is that you?”

“You are a pathetic spy, William.” Harry said. Okay, so he was feeling a little cranky at the moment. “You continue to blow your cover.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

Harry shrugged. “I’ve been ill.”

Tonks stared at Harry for a second and then disappeared through the door.

“He’s sending you on raids, now?” Zareh sounded angry.

“Eh.” Harry shrugged. “I’m only here for the popcorn.” He flinched as he felt Voldemort’s anger surge and raised a hand to his head. He Occluded.

“Tom? Are you alright?”

Harry stared at him. What an odd question. “Fine. Just tired.” Harry cocked his head to the side. “I’m not going to do anything, you know. You can put the wand down.”

Tonks returned and McGonagall followed along behind her. She stopped in shock and stared at Harry. “Professor Zareh, who is this?”

“This is the Dark Lord’s student,” He told her. “This is Tom.” McGonagall turned to stare at him with a new look in her eyes. “Tom, Professor McGonagall.”

Harry felt a sliver of strength returning and he pushed himself to his feet. “Professor McGonagall, it is nice to meet you in person.”

“Likewise.” McGonagall looked him over. “Could you please remove your mask?”

“I understand the aversion to it, but I would prefer not to,” he said.

“Please, Tom.” McGonagall said. Harry sighed and sent a little magic to insure that his physical changes stayed. He felt strength leave him again and he leaned against the wall as he removed his mask. McGonagall’s face fell a bit.

“I know I am no Gilderoy Lockheart, but I do not think I look that bad.” Harry said, stung just a bit.

“I had thought you were someone else.” McGonagall admitted.

“I understand.” Harry took a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping that his magic would return to him. He felt ill, truly, and wanted nothing more than his bed.

She took in sweat damp hair and haggard appearance and gasped. “You are unwell?” McGonagall said.

“I’m recovering from an illness.” Harry said. “I’m afraid I need to sit down.” Harry started to sink back to the floor, but Zareh stepped forward and caught him. McGonagall gestured Zareh out the door.

“We’ll take him to Hogwarts.”

“NO!” Harry pulled away from Zareh, only to be stopped by Tonks. The witch threw an arm around his shoulders and Apparated.

Hogwarts appeared before his eyes and he groaned. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You need medical attention," McGonagall said as she appeared behind him. "I refuse to allow a child in your condition to go without a qualified medical attendant."

"I'll be fine in twenty minutes. Besides, the Dark Lord sees to my needs just fine."

"I doubt it," McGonagall said sharply. "Indulge an old woman."

"You are hardly old," Harry said, "but very manipulative." Harry pulled out his wand and focused on the group.

"Tom, you're not marked. You're little more than a child. Just let our nurse take a look at you."

"A child?" Harry raised his wand. "Do you really think so?" He focused his meager magic and a large fireball rolled across Hogwarts grounds. Harry turned and ran the moment they were all distracted. He passed the gate and whispered his portkey password. He saw McGonagall turn as the portkey whisked him away.

He dropped to his knees in the cemetery and caught his breath. Harry shook it off and climbed to his feet. He was still weak, still shaky, but he knew that sleep would come only after he placated the Dark Lord. He entered the house to the sound of screams. Voldemort is obviously displeased. Harry threw open the doors and strode into the room.

"Sir? I'm back." He said to Voldemort.

Voldemort turned and stared at him for a second. "Tom?"

"It wasn't Robinson's fault," Harry told him. "The Order forced them to leave. I was the easiest to leave behind to make sure that everyone else could get away."

“Dismissed!” Voldemort snapped to the gathered Death Eaters. They filed out one by one, casting nervous glances over their shoulders at the boy standing without fear in their lord’s presence.

“Explain yourself.” Voldemort’s anger leaked into his voice.

This explanation thing is becoming just a little annoying. “The Order was coming. We all needed to get out. I haven’t been Marked. The Order saw a boy when they looked at me, just as I knew they would. You forget, sir, that I know the Order. I know how they operate. Until they see me Marked, I’m a misguided little boy, not a Death Eater.”

Voldemort’s expression slowly turned from furious to contemplative. He stepped away from Harry and nodded. “You did well,” he told Harry after a long moment. “Indeed, I did not expect such high levels of manipulation from you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry said. “Is it alright if I return home now? I’m a little tired.”

“Yes, rest well.” Voldemort said, waving him away. Harry said good-bye and left the room. A figure appeared in front of him and Harry stopped.

“Hello, Robinson,” Harry said. “What can I do for you?”

“Thank you,” Robinson said quietly.

“Not a problem,” Harry told him. “I know you tried to take me with you. I understand.”

“I think the Dark Lord underestimates you, young Lord.”

“Thank you for the compliment.” Harry tried to keep back a sigh. “In the meantime, you might keep your thoughts about me to yourself.”

Robinson merely nodded and moved out of Harry’s way. Harry left the mansion and hissed his password. He reappeared in his suite at Dracula’s house. He removed his robe and stowed it and his mask

back into the case. He stripped off his clothes and stepped into the shower. The water steamed around him as he leaned against the wall, trying to banish the screams he had heard. The images he had conjured, the feelings he had needed to conjure them...it all frightened him. He let the water pound down on him, hoping he could wash everything away.

He left the shower and dressed in new pajamas. He dried his hair as best he could and hung up the towel. He slid into bed and stared at the canopy above him. Harry traced the pattern on the canopy with his eyes for almost an hour before he admitted to himself that he still felt slightly ill, even though his magic had recovered by this point. I had to do it. I couldn't let all of those people die. I-

He pushed himself out of bed and found his robe. He needed to wander around for a while, but he also knew that Dracula would have a fit if he found Harry wandering around without one. The days were warm here, but the nights could be very cool. Harry left his room and meandered down the hallway. He stopped and looked at the works of art and pieces displayed on little pedestals. Harry was beginning to appreciate the still art he found here. He could stand and stare at it without having to make conversation with a cranky subject. He could sum up the difference between this art and Hogwarts' art: Sir Cadogan.

He looked to his left and saw that he was close to his aunt's room. That was what he wanted, an adult that would tell him everything would be okay, no matter what was going on in the world. The headlines tomorrow in London would scream about the Dark Lord's student; tonight, he only wanted someone that wouldn't demand anything from him.

Harry ended up in front of her door just a few minutes later, only to stall before knocking. He stared at the grain of the wood of her door, pondering the wisdom of disturbing his aunt at this hour. The decision was taken from him when the door flew open and his aunt stood there.

"Harry? What's wrong?" She asked. She studied him for a second. Harry could only give a little shrug in response. She stepped back and motioned for him to come into her room. Harry obeyed and she

led him to an overstuffed sofa. She pulled him down next to her and nudged him to lean against her. "Having a rough night?"

"Yeah," He said. "I just couldn't settle to sleep." He told her. "My mind is too busy."

"Ah, I understand," she said, pulling an afghan off the armrest of the couch and draping it over them. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Harry said. "It's just...can I still be a good person if I have to do some bad things from time to time?"

Petunia tightened her arms around him and sighed. "I think that the fact that you are worried about it says enough, don't you?" She asked softly.

Harry leaned back against her and nodded. "Paul said something like that before."

"Then it must be true," Petunia said. "Paul knows what he is talking about. You have another follow-up appointment with him coming up when we get home. You should bring up these feelings you're having with him."

"Yeah," Harry said. The two lapsed into silence and Harry fell into a slight doze as Petunia started running a hand through his hair. He relaxed against his aunt and sighed in contentment.

"Is he asleep?" Khalid asked Petunia.

"You really shouldn't sneak up on me," Petunia told him. "I've been known to carry a cast iron skillet."

"Truly a formidable woman," Dracula said as he appeared.

"You better believe it," Remus said. He took out his wand and transfigured the couch into a queen-sized bed. "Everyone in. Quietly." Remus took the space on the other side of Harry. Dracula and Khalid took up the leftover space and they all settled for the night.

“Is he alright?” Dracula asked softly.

“For now,” Petunia told him. “Just let him sleep.” The adults all dropped off one by one, except Petunia. She stayed awake, watching Harry and running an occasional hand through his hair.

Author's Note: Real Life has been a bit of a witch lately. Enjoy the chapter.

PART ONE OF TWO

“You are doing well, my boy. Absolutely wonderful in terms of dueling, or so Robinson says. The way you battled that last Order member, particularly. Tell me, Tom, how did you manage to use Crucio in such an amusing manner?” Voldemort asked as he slid a glass towards the boy sitting across from him.

“What McGonagall forgets is that windows can be reflective surfaces, just like mirrors. Angle the wand the right way, and you have spells flying in every single direction! She didn’t even see it coming. She took it right in the back, just like all Muggle-lovers should!”

“Well done, lad. Well done indeed.” Voldemort reached out and ruffled Harry’s hair. “I have a gift for you, my child.” Voldemort said as he rose from the table. Harry drained the liquid in his glass and moved to follow Voldemort.

“Gift?” Harry asked in surprise. Voldemort never gave gifts. Ever.

“Yes. I think you’re ready for this one, Tom. It was a little difficult retrieving it, but it’s here now, for your enjoyment. I’m certain you’ll like it.”

Voldemort led Harry to a room in the basement and gestured for him to open a thick door covered over with grime. Harry obeyed and pulled open the door. It was dark inside and his eyes needed a few seconds to adjust before he could make out the shape huddled on the ground.

Petunia Dursley lay on the ground in front of him, obviously weak and shaken. She looked as though she had put up a fight and came out the worse for it. Harry stared at her, random snatches of memory making their way to the surface of his mind. The way she used to ignore him, the days he spent locked in the cupboard, her calling him

a freak, Petunia abandoning him at that Muggle mental hospital, ignoring his pleas to leave. He dropped to his knees in front of Voldemort and grasped one hand of the Dark Lord's in his own, pressing his lips to the scaly skin. "Thank you, my Lord. I am truly honored by all the trouble you went through to bring me such a precious gift. I don't deserve this."

"You deserve all this and more, my child. My dark child. Dumbledore never could figure out how you were put together, but I did, didn't I?" Voldemort rested his other hand on Harry's as though he were bestowing a blessing. "Like a seed, you only needed a little attention to grow. Enjoy your gift, son, and come see me when you are finished. We have plans to make, so that we may take Hogwarts and crush the resistance we face." Voldemort patted Harry's cheek once before moving from the room.

Harry watched his master leave the room before pulling shut the door and locking it. "We won't be disturbed." Harry said softly.

"Harry, please." Petunia said through a bruised lip.

"Don't address me so familiarly, Muggle!" Harry shouted at her. "You're nothing to me! Nothing at all! Except a plaything, a practice dummy, A MUGGLE!" Harry took out his wand and took aim at Petunia. "I think I'm going to enjoy this. CRUCIO!"

Harry thrashed out of his nightmare and attempted to get out of bed. He had to pause as he tried to complete that action, because he realized that he was not alone. He tried to catch his breath as he looked around. What in the-?

"Harry?" Aunt Petunia whispered. Harry jerked away from the voice. How could he do that? How could he have hurt her? She was-

"Steady, Harry. There's nothing here to hurt you." Remus's voice said from his other side. Harry's confusion went up another notch. Remus and Petunia in the same room?

“Except two vampires,” A far too cheerful voice said from the foot of the bed. “Even then, we promise not to bite...hard.” Harry was sure that sentence was supposed to be funny.

“Remus, he’s shaking!” Petunia’s alarmed voice said from Harry’s left.

“Shaking, sweating, and terrified,” Dracula’s voice came from the foot of the bed. Harry could see the vampire balancing on the footboard. The situation was odd enough that Harry had to stare. How did he do that?

“Harry, what’s wrong?” Petunia asked, turning Harry towards her. “Did you have a nightmare?”

Harry froze and he stared at his aunt’s worried face. He hadn’t hurt her? She wasn’t on the ground, bloody and broken by him? She wasn’t hurt? Not dying? He choked and tried to figure out something to say. He couldn’t-

“Right. Vampires out of the room.” Remus ordered the other two people in the room.

“Should that not also apply to werewolves?” Dracula asked. Harry could hear the worry in his voice.

“Out,” Petunia said to the vampires. “Harry needs his uncle too, at the moment. I’ll make sure you can coddle Harry later in the day.” Petunia said softly as she took one of Harry’s hands. The door shut behind the vampires and Petunia tugged at Harry’s hand. “It’s okay, Harry. Go ahead and relax. It’s okay.”

Petunia and Remus managed to arrange Harry between the two of them. Harry still wasn’t completely sure that what he was seeing was real. He touched Petunia’s cheek and she smiled at him. “You’re safe here, sweetie. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Remus nudged Harry closer to his aunt and refused to allow Harry to retreat. "Just relax, Harry. It was a nightmare, whatever you saw. We're still here."

"I-" Harry shuddered and curled around himself. He tried to fight the revulsion he felt for what he had seen. She was here. She wasn't dead. He hadn't tortured her to the point of madness, only to push her over the edge with- "You're-" He only shook his head and buried it into the pillows. They smelled pleasant and faintly of her perfume. He shuddered again and fisted his hands in the blankets. "I hurt...I...he gave her....I WANTED to hurt...I WANTED to kill her...I WAS HIS!" The last part gritted out between his teeth. "He wants too much from me. I can't!" He pushed himself away from the bed and sat up to stare at Petunia. "I can't!"

Petunia studied him for a second before moving forward and wrapping her arms around him. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, Harry." Petunia told him, her arms tightening as he tried to struggle. He didn't deserve comfort from her. He didn't deserve peace, or happiness, or anything normal. He was a freak, and the worst part was, he knew it. "You aren't his." She said softly, one hand lifting to card through his hair, her other arm holding Harry firmly to keep him from leaving. "You are my nephew, my child, and nothing anyone says or does will ever change that." Petunia tried to make soothing noises and hold onto Harry at the same time. He was stronger than she was, and he was winning.

A whisper caught Petunia's attention and she looked up to see Khalid standing there. "He's too distraught to listen to you. He's not even aware that you are here." Khalid looked down at the struggling teenager. "I can calm him a bit, if you like."

"It won't hurt him?"

"No, only assist in your efforts," Khalid took her question as permission and he reached out towards Harry's face. He snapped his fingers close to Harry's eyes and Harry startled, now focused on Khalid's hand. Khalid slowly moved his hand up towards his own face and came to a rest next to his eyes. Harry stared for a second, but a

second was all the vampire needed. A quick touch on Harry's forehead stopped Harry's struggles and he collapsed against Petunia.

"Thank you, Khalid," Petunia said. "I appreciate your help."

"Of course. Please let us know if you need anything." Khalid was not there at the end of the sentence.

Petunia's attention turned towards Harry. "You're safe here, Harry. Nothing's going to harm you. Not while I'm around."

"Kay." Harry mumbled, fully collapsing into the bed and snuggling in between the two of them. "Don't-"

"Don't what, Harry?" Petunia asked, stroking his hair.

"Don't leave me." Harry whispered. "Don't hate me."

"Such nonsense! Leaving you and hating you. You just try to get rid of us, mister!" Petunia said with a smile. Harry returned it and sighed as his body relaxed back into sleep. Over the blankets, Remus's hand found Petunia's and he smiled. Petunia only smiled back and settled down to keep watch over her child. His nightmares were obviously increasing in strength. She would have to make an appointment with Paul.

Harry tried to hide deeper in the lounge chair and avoid the vampires. It seemed that everyone had witnessed his nightmares two nights before and were determined to reassure Harry of love, care, and affection. It was slowly suffocating him.

Still, it was nice. Petunia would run her hand over his hair, causing his hair gel to become useless after the first hour. Remus would pat his knee, Dudley gave him odd little smiles, and the vampires...well, Harry was patient. Harry was sure that if he gave them enough time, they would stop removing him from the ground and hugging him. Dracula himself was worse than Khalid was, but Khalid often accompanied his assaults with sloppy kisses, which disturbed Harry in a dark, hidden part of himself. Vampires were supposed to be evil,

dark, and bloodthirsty creatures; evil, dark, and bloodthirsty creatures did not give cartoon slobber kisses.

“Harry?” Lucian’s voice said from the patio door. “Are you busy?”

“I’m hiding from everyone.” Harry admitted. “I’m glad they love me and all, but it’s become...”

“Suffocating?”

“Yes, how did you know?” Harry asked in shock.

“Welcome to being around vampires. They think we mortals are fragile things. You should have seen the master when I came down with the flu. Quite alarming, considering all I needed was three days in bed.” Lucian smiled at the memory. “The tailor needs to do a final fitting, so if you would like to follow me...”

Harry gave a quick look around and nodded. He followed Lucian into the house and up a back stairwell. “What is this outfit for?” Harry asked halfway up the stairs.

“Only the master knows, Harry.” Lucian said as he reached the top of the stairs. “He keeps his own counsel on certain things.”

“This being one of them?” Harry asked.

“Yes, this is one of them,” Lucian said with a faint tinge of annoyance. “He does this a lot, actually, in terms of keeping secrets from the staff.” Lucian shrugged. “We’ve learned to just go along with whatever he’s planning and avoid the fallout of displeased vampire as much as possible.” Lucian threw a cocky grin at Harry and motioned him into his quarters.

The elf-like tailor was waiting when Harry entered his rooms. He held a garment bag and beamed at Harry, obviously proud of himself. He offered the bag to Lucian and then motioned for Harry to step into his dressing room. Obviously, he wanted Harry to change. Lucian said a few words to the man and ushered Harry into the dressing room.

“This is heavy.” Lucian said as he hung the garment bag. “Let’s see what it looks like on you, instead of on the hanger.”

“Okay, Lucian, but don’t expect too much. I don’t really fit in the black tie crowd.”

“Says the person able to wear a suit at a moment’s notice.” Lucian opened the garment bag and made an odd noise. “Oh, this is very nice.”

“Urgh,” Harry said, eyeing the color. “I thought it was going to be black. Will it look better on?”

“Just change,” Lucian said, laying out the clothing. “And don’t forget the shoes.” Lucian placed the shoes next to the clothing.

“This is ridiculous.” Harry said as he fastened the trousers.

“Stop whining.” Lucian said. He helped Harry adjust the shirt’s collar and then handed him a waistcoat.

“What is this? Embroidery?”

“A local specialty,” Lucian said. “Very traditional. Very manly.”

“Right,” Harry said doubtfully. “Whatever you say, Lucian.”

“Just put it on,” Lucian’s hands disappeared into the garment bag and pulled out a coat. “This is called a cojoc. It’s a coat, with the necessary designs and embellishments to indicate that this is a special party.” Lucian held it out so that Harry could slip it on. “And you say that you do not fit in this crowd.” Lucian turned Harry towards the mirror and Harry stared at himself.

“It does look better on.” He said in astonishment. The coat was knee length and a rich red color. The embroidery was tiny and snaked along the edges in gold and black. The white shirt had some sort of pattern at the cuffs and neck. The trousers were black and had a slim

line of embroidery running down the side seams. Lucian appeared behind him with something in his hands. "Arms up," Lucian said. Harry complied and Lucian wrapped a black strip of cloth around Harry's waist. "You knot it like this." Lucian said slowly, tying it so Harry could see how to manage on his own. "It's a belt." Lucian said. "All traditional men wear something like this."

"Lucian, what is going on? Why the formal clothing for a party you've mentioned, but I know nothing about."

"You'll find out. The master is keeping it as a surprise. Now let's allow the tailor to see you."

"But, Lucian-" Harry only sighed as Lucian dragged Harry out of the dressing room and into his sitting room.

"Ah!" The tailor motioned Harry onto a stool. Harry sighed and stepped up. The little man circled him, and said a few delighted words, smoothed the jacket over Harry's shoulders and patted him arm. He said a few words and then left.

"He is pleased with you." Lucian said, motioned Harry down from the stool. "Let me hang this up so it won't become wrinkled."

"You're avoiding the subject." Harry said.

"I'm following orders." Lucian said. "Strict orders."

"Fine, don't tell me." Harry growled to Lucian.

"The master could tell you," Lucian said in a speculative voice.

"Thank you for the suggestion, Lucian." Harry said happily. "I'll be sure to find him." Harry changed into his earlier outfit and left his rooms, dodging a man carrying a rather alarming amount of flowers down the hallway. The house was abuzz today with many new faces running around in mad efficiency. Harry had exiled himself to the verandah in hopes of peace, but now he thought that self-exile had

been a mistake. He could have figured out this mystery before all of this...madness.

Harry searched the lower level with only one person in mind, but no one seemed to know where the “master” was now. It was quite frustrating, in all truth. To add to that mystery was the number of preparations going on around him. Flowers and vines hung in many places, valances of some flowing cloth Harry hesitated to name secured up and around windows, something was taking place in the main hallway that Harry was afraid to attempt to explain, and numerous other little tasks set upon by a variety of people.

Harry finally checked the grand ballroom and found his target. “Vlad!” Harry said, relieved to have found the man.

“Ah, Harry!” Vlad said from the middle of the ballroom. “How are you this fine day?” He said, motioning Harry to join him. Harry started to cross the floor when he noticed activity going on above his head. He stopped and looked up.

“What are they doing?” Harry asked.

“Ensuring that the chandelier will look its best this evening, that is all.” Dracula said happily.

“Uncle Vlad!” A voice called out from the doorway. “Gustav said you were in here!” Harry turned with Dracula and saw two young women enter the ballroom.

“Uncle Vlad?” Harry asked in a whisper.

“AH!” The vampire disappeared from Harry’s side and Harry saw him lift one of the girls in his arms. “Danielle and Polina, my little ones!” Harry could only watch as the vampire swung both girls around without strain, give each of them a kiss on the cheek, and carefully lower them to the floor again. “Come, little ones, I have someone for you to meet.” Dracula tucked one of their hands into the crook of his arms and led them to where Harry was standing.

“This, my dears, is one of my new friends. Harry Potter, may I present my great nieces, Miss Danielle Defoe and Miss Polina Sians.” Dracula smiled at Harry and then gestured towards him. “Danielle, this is Mister Harry Potter.”

“A pleasure to meet the both of you,” Harry said as he gave a quick handshake and lowered his head over each girl’s hand. “I was unaware that Vlad had family visiting. Have you been here long?” Harry asked. He didn’t notice Dracula fading into the background.

“We just arrived,” Danielle said. “Uncle Vlad always invites us to his Summer Gathering.” Danielle giggled. “Well, he has since we were old enough to waltz without needing to go to bed directly after dinner.” She admitted, tucking a slip of dark brown hair behind her ear. Harry nodded in understand and took a second to study her. She had dark brown hair, dancing blue eyes, and a light complexion that only made her more pleasing to the eye.

“About this Summer Gathering, what exactly is going to happen?” Harry asked, seizing on his chance for information. Polina, with her grey eyes dancing, flipped her light hair over her shoulder and laughed.

“It’s a party,” Polina said. “Almost like a ball, with loads of dancing and important people. Uncle Vlad invites us so we learn some, what did he call it, ‘social graces,’ and he gets to pair us with young men who might be bored.” Polina giggled behind her hand.

Harry had a sudden sense of doom descend on his shoulders. “Young men?” He repeated.

“Yes, something about two cousins this time.” Danielle said happily. “You wouldn’t be one of them, would you?” She asked. “If so, I claim you!”

“Er, I don’t believe so. I haven’t received an invitation.” Harry said.

“Danielle, he’s the guest of honor! Uncle Vlad will choose his partner!” Polina said. “Oh, I hope it’s me.”

“Excuse me, ladies. I have to find your Uncle Vlad and give him a piece of my mind.” Harry said calmly. “Again, nice to meet you.” He gave them a nod and left the ballroom quickly, hoping to catch the vampire so he could get some answers. He ignored the workers around him and headed straight for the vampire’s study. He entered without knocking.

Dracula did not look up from the desk. “What did you think of my nieces, little magus?” Dracula asked in a pleased voice.

“What, exactly, is going on this evening? And why am I the guest of honor?” He asked, coming to a halt in front of the desk.

“You are coming out to society, my dear magus. Your formal introduction to society. Your relatives are quite pleased by everything, and the werewolf said there is something quite similar planned in your home country.”

Harry could only stare at the vampire in shock. “Why?” He asked.

“Would you prefer I allow your headmaster introduce you to society? He has that right, in England’s view, as being your acknowledged mentor in social situations. After all, he defended you in the press and the court. He could formally introduce you to society as well.”

“No,” Harry objected. “I don’t want him to have anything more to do with my life than he has already managed, thank you.” Harry pondered the situation. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

“Would you have allowed me to throw a party for your birthday had I asked you for permission?” Dracula asked, his tone already implying that he knew the answer.

“No,” Harry admitted.

“You see?” Dracula gave Harry a little shake by the shoulder. “After this party, you will be able to enter any social situation with supreme confidence, and you will need it, little magus.”

“What do you know that I don’t?” Harry demanded.

“Nothing you won’t know soon,” Vlad promised. “Think of this party as a practice run.” Vlad’s expression changed. Harry knew that this particular expression meant Dracula was listening to something not in the room. “Danielle, Polina, and Dudley are waiting for you. They wish to practice dancing. You do know how to dance?”

“Somewhat,” Harry admitted. “I could use a bit more practice.”

“Then go,” Dracula said. “The girls are experts. They will teach you everything you will need to know.”

Harry thanked Dracula and left to meet the girls. He stopped just a few feet outside the door. “Just when did I agree to this?”

Harry watched the guests arriving from the first floor. Cars formed a line down the hill, illuminated only by the headlights.

“Nervous?” Harry turned at the voice and saw his aunt standing there, ready for the party downstairs.

“You look beautiful.” Harry told her. She smiled at him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“Thank you, Harry. I have to say that you are looking quite dashing yourself. I’m afraid you grew up while I wasn’t watching. You look every inch a man.”

“I-” Harry didn’t know how to respond. “Thanks. I am nervous.” He admitted softly. “I swear I saw a reporter or two.”

“Or ten.” Petunia said with a soft laugh. “Vlad says that this party gives everyone a chance to see the real Harry Potter.”

“Thanks, Aunt Petunia. No pressure, I see.” Harry felt Vlad calling him. “Vlad wants me.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever become accustomed to vampires calling someone without saying a word.” Petunia said, resting a hand in Harry’s offered arm. “Why aren’t you dressed yet?”

“Vlad says I don’t have to enter until the guests have had time to relax. In other words, I get to be fashionably late.”

“Lucky man.” Petunia said. Harry escorted Petunia downstairs and saw Remus, looking slightly dazed.

“Vlad got to you, too?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know what happened,” Remus admitted. “One minute, I was enjoying a nap, and the next...” Remus gestured helplessly. His mouth gaped as he stared at Petunia. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you, Remus.” Petunia said as Harry handed her over to him. “Save a dance for me, Harry?”

“Absolutely!” Harry said. “Hear that, Remus? You can’t have her all night!”

“Yeah, she has to save a dance for both her kids.” Dudley said as he came down the hallway. “Harry, Vlad’s looking for you. Did you know?”

“Yes, I know. I suppose I’m just avoiding the inevitable.”

“He was looking a little upset,” Dudley said. “He’s pacing outside of your room. You should get going.”

“Thanks, Dud. See you later?”

“Sure thing. Good luck!” With that, Dudley dashed off towards the figure coming down the stairs. It was Polina, and if she was any indication of the evening’s purpose, the whole place was going to be a presentation of beauty.

Harry climbed the stairs, a terrible feeling starting to coil in his stomach. This evening was going to be disastrous. There was no other word for it. Vlad was going to trot him out and show everyone- “AH!” Both Khalid and Dracula were waiting outside his door. They rushed towards him and pulled him along the hallway, babbling the whole while about how they didn’t have enough time. Harry was perplexed. They had a full two hours before Harry’s entrance was scheduled. All Harry needed to do was- WHAT IN THE WORLD?

In the short time Harry had been away from his quarters, the place had been transformed. Most of the furniture rested to one side, and several different things were set up. Dracula physically lifted him into the bathroom, not allowed Harry to see much. “Shower!” He said. “As fast as possible. Don’t worry about your hair, or shaving. Just shower. Use the blue bottle.” Harry swore under his breath and tossed off his clothes as he started the hot water. He stepped into the spray and picked up the blue bottle and a washcloth. This is going to be a long night.

Just seconds after Harry stepped out of the shower, barely wrapped in a towel, Khalid appeared, even more excited than Vlad had been. “Come along, little magus!” Khalid pulled him out of the bathroom and into what had been the sitting room of his quarters. Harry took a second to study it as Khalid pulled him to a station that had a screen set up to section it off from the rest of the room. Harry felt that this was familiar...Hermione had described it before. They had transformed his room into a spa! Khalid pulled him behind the screen and Harry came face to face with the most massive man he had ever seen. “Harry, Dennis. Dennis, Harry. Up on the table, Harry.”

Harry took a firmer hold on his towel and shook his head. “This isn’t necessary.” He tried not to sound as panicky as he felt. He was ready to run. Dennis muttered something in French. Harry decided he didn’t care. Khalid answered the man and shook his head.

Dracula walked around the partition and frowned at Harry. "These people are going to make sure you look best for your evening. You should cooperate."

"But I only need to change." Harry protested.

"Ah, the naïveté of youth. Enjoy yourself, Harry. You'll come to no harm here." Vlad reassured him. None of these people is going to harm you, Harry. You can relax. Dracula motioned for Harry to get on the massage table. Now, little magus. Or I can put you there.

Harry glared at Dracula for a long second before deciding that he might just lose this fight. He sighed and walked to the table, pausing just another second before sitting down. Vlad only raised an eyebrow when Harry didn't do more than sit. "I don't know what to do." He admitted.

"What else do you do when someone gives you a massage?" Dracula asked, sarcasm coming through in his tone. Harry rolled his eyes and then rested his chest on the padded table. Dennis arranged a new towel over him before stealing Harry's shower towel. Dennis mumbled something to Dracula and the vampire frowned at Harry. "Did you hear him?"

"I don't speak French." Harry said.

"That's something we're going to have to remedy." Dracula muttered. "You're not relaxing."

Harry let out a desperate little laugh. "How am I supposed to relax with all of this going on?" Harry waved a hand about, gesturing at his room and the situation in general.

Khalid reached over and touched Harry's forehead lightly. Harry felt every muscle in his body fall limp. "I hate you." Harry muttered to Khalid.

"I know!" The vampire said brightly.

Dennis started his work and Harry conceded the fight. The vampires were having fun, and Harry was the fun. Oh well. Things could be worse. Dennis muttered nonsense words to Harry as he worked. Every time he hit a spot that made Harry twitch, he would stop, focus on that spot, and then move away to another spot. After fifteen minutes, he helped Harry sit up and then handed him a glass of water. He gestured for Harry to drink it as he picked up a robe. He took the glass away from Harry when he was finished and held out the robe for Harry. Harry slid his arms into it and belted it shut. "Merci." Harry said, speaking the only real French he knew. The word made Dennis smile before he lightly pushed Harry out from behind the screen.

"Now you look relaxed." Khalid said, already standing there in his finery. "Over here, please." He said.

Harry approached the barber's chair with a little trepidation and climbed into it. "Harry, this is Marcus. He doesn't speak a lot of English, so you'll just have to follow his lead. Cooperate."

"You and Vlad enjoy torturing me, don't you?" Harry asked.

Vlad gave him a confused look. "This is torture?" Harry shook his head and felt the seat back lower to rest the back of his neck against a basin. Warm water flowed over his hair and he shut his eyes. Marcus babbled to Harry in a language Harry couldn't place as he washed Harry's hair. Harry only caught a few words about hair texture or something equally strange. Harry had to admit, the whole letting someone else wash your hair thing was relaxing. He hadn't felt this relaxed since...not counting the massage...his last days with Bleys.

Marcus righted the chair and Harry felt him towel off the excess water before dragging a comb through his hair. The first snip of scissors startled him. "He's cutting my hair?"

"Just a trim and shaping." Khalid said. "That's all. Now, I have to leave. After this, you sit in that chair and no arguments about what will happen. You just cooperate. Lucian will be here to help you dress after that."

The next forty-five minutes was something Harry never wanted to repeat again. Marcus wasn't bad. He'd trimmed Harry's hair, and put something in it that Harry didn't recognize at all, but it helped to tame his wild hair. He even gave Harry a smaller bottle to keep for use in the future. Then, he gave everything a quick once-over with a hairdryer, and then secured it back from Harry's face with a metal clip.

Harry swore never to share what happened next with anyone. Ever. He received his first, and last, manicure and pedicure. He'd tried protesting that no one was going to see his feet, but the man taking care of his nails only gave him a blank look and went on with his work. After the man was finished, Lucian appeared out of nowhere and ushered Harry into the bedroom to change. His entire outfit was waiting on, including pants. Lucian only smiled at Harry's incredulous look. "A gift from the master." He said, motioning for the robe Harry was wearing.

"I never wear this type!" Harry protested, the fine material resting innocently on the chair.

"You do now. I believe the master rifled through your clothing earlier. He had everything old destroyed."

"My suits? My shirts?" Harry asked in horror. He actually liked some of the things Aunt Petunia had picked out for him!

"No, just the underwear." Lucian said with a grin.

"I'm never going to live this down." Harry groaned.

"I feel he's thinking you have a female admirer somewhere that would enjoy seeing the silk." Harry felt fire in his face and shook his head. He pulled on the outfit and pondered whether he could actually go through with all of this. After all, he could Apparate anywhere on the globe. He could be at home, holed up in his room, ignoring the world. No, instead he found himself in Romania, the plaything of the world's most dangerous vampire. If he starts dressing me like a doll all the time, I am sooo staking him.

“Here,” Lucian said as Harry started to leave the room. “The master had this made for you.” Lucian opened a ring box and Harry stared at it. It wasn’t overly large or ornate. It was a simple silver ring with an emblem. Harry studied it and felt a smile tug at his lips. A lightening bolt covered a crossed wand and sword (which looked an awful lot like Gryffindor’s sword). Harry smiled fully and took it from its case. “He said that you needed your own mark. Not your family’s mark.”

“He’s right,” Harry said, slipping it on his right ring finger. “I really like it.” He smoothed his hands over his jacket and looked at Lucian. “How do I look?”

Lucian motioned Harry over to the full-length mirror. Harry stared, completely taken aback. He had tried on this outfit, but he looked completely different now. He looked...

“You look like the prince you are.” Dracula said from behind him. Harry turned around, surprised at the voice. He hadn’t seen Dracula come into the room behind him. Oh, right. He doesn’t have a reflection.

“Thank you.” Harry said. “For everything.”

“Come along, Magus.” Dracula said. “The evening is calling.” Vlad said, a grim smile forming on his lips. Harry thanked Lucian for his help, said a general thank you to the spa crew, and left to go downstairs.

Author's Note Two: I hope to have the second part up soon. I was going to keep everything in the same chapter, but it was turning MASSIVE. We're talking a thirty page chapter. Yikes.

Author's Note: I had a chapter ready, but I hated it. This one, I am not responsible for, as I have no idea as to its origins. Blame the Muse and sleep deprivation.

Harry felt Danielle squeeze his arm as the doors to the ballroom opened. Applause from the gathered crowd washed over him and Harry felt the same adrenaline he had discovered on stage at St. Jude's. This was a performance of a sort, and Harry would not disappoint anyone of his or her expectations. Vlad led the way and Harry followed behind, his anxiety starting to mount.

Dracula had asked him to shift into his real appearance and keep it from here on out and Harry had done so, feeling just a little exposed. He had been "growing" all summer, but he had not felt ready, really ready, to reveal his appearance. Now, he had no choice. It was time to commit to this role of "young man come into his own", even with Dracula swearing he was a prince of some sort. Really, the vampire had delusions of grandeur when it came to Harry.

Remember, you are the prince they have come to see. Vlad's voice drifted across Harry's mind as he and Danielle took their place in the center of the floor. Danielle stepped into his arms, a waltz started, and Harry committed to the role he needed to play this evening.

He kept his focus on Danielle for the first two dances before he claimed his aunt from Dudley. Harry got to keep her for only one dance before Remus came back to her side. Harry surrendered her to Remus and took a moment to study his surroundings.

He had seen the ballroom when it was covered and shaded, but it had taken on new life. The floor itself was a light wood, but it was so polished that Harry couldn't hope to identify it. The walls were papered and Harry had to suppress a smile at the gold-leaf dotted along the designs. Only an immortal could enjoy decorating something ordinary so lavishly and still consider it subpar. There were mirrors decorating the walls, and tiny cherubs rested in the corners, staring down at the dancers in alabaster indifference. The ceiling was painted a mix of golden sunny skies flowing into a silver starry night. In the center of it was the chandelier, glittering over everything.

Dracula had arranged everything, from the music to Harry's dance partners. He was never left wanting, and Danielle came back every three or four dances, just to keep him on his toes. He met girls and women from different places and of different ages.

The youngest girl was fifteen years old, from Germany, and had accompanied her widowed father this evening. She had never heard of Harry before, but blamed that on not following current events as closely as she should. She doubted that the man claiming to be Dracula was the real thing, and thought that the actor playing him did very well in all of his attributes.

The oldest was a proud great-grandmother of a hereditary ruling family from Italy that still managed to produce a wizard here or there in their offspring. She had been invited to Lord Dracula's house before, thank you very much, and mentioned more than once that Harry was too thin and needed fed more often. Harry assured her that he was merely thin from overwork and would regain his former health in no time at all. She had threatened to take him home with her so that he could properly rest without hovering vampires, and Harry had to bring up the fact that his aunt would miss him. That brought him peace on the food subject, and the talk had just turned to "pretty young ladies" when the song changed and Danielle had returned to rescue him from the woman.

"Thank you," he whispered as Danielle stepped back into his arms and they started on the next round of dancing.

"For what?" she asked, truly perplexed.

"For saving me from maternal hovering." He said softly, motioning with his head towards the retreating woman.

"Oh, you're welcome. It was nothing. The young men are wonderful this year, but you're far more interesting at the moment. Uncle Vlad told me that you are a wizard and attend the English school, is that correct?"

“Ah, yes. I didn’t know you knew about the magical community.” He said as he negotiated a rather tricky little step that had caused problems in his earlier dancing practice.

“Your governments do not keep secrets as well as they think they can.” Danielle told him. “A person may find the odd and strange if he knows where to look.” She told him with a wry grin.

“Does your Uncle Vlad know you are this scarily intelligent?” Harry asked as they maneuvered around another dancing couple.

“I hope not,” she giggled. “If he knew, he would cease to underestimate me, and then I would not learn anything at all from him.” Harry snickered with her at her guile and the two devoted all of their attention to the music and the dance they were sharing.

This could not compare to his experiences at the Yule Ball in his fourth year. For one thing, he was having way too much fun. Everything from the music and the company he kept put him at ease. He was relaxing in every sense of the word. The role had started to become second nature and he found himself preening a little under the attention. What was wrong with enjoying the performance? Nothing at all.

Once he had justified that it was okay to have fun at a ball and celebrate his birthday at the same time, everything fell into place. He met everyone he could and spoke with each group. Some people knew his story and asked for autographs. He gave them, just a little embarrassed at the notice, but content to make someone else happy for the evening. Even non-magical people looked at him in a slight hint of awe, making him think that Vlad had something to do with it. He posed for pictures if asked, and danced with anyone willing to approach him during his free moments.

He was learning a lot. He learned that Danielle was content to be an escort (and she made sure to emphasize that that was all she was, contrary to many young men’s ideas of what her position was) for now, but she had dreams of attending university and studying to become a historian. Harry found that she was passionate about the

subject. "You don't understand, Harry." Danielle told him with a patient tone to her voice. "History for you is meaningless numbers and facts. I blame your professor at school. History consists of numerous stories and intrigues, triumphs and heartaches, beginnings and endings. It cycles over and over again. Empires rise and fall, discoveries are made and forgotten."

"So you like the fact that it is stories?" He asked, still not completely understanding what she was trying to tell him.

"No, it's more than that," she explained. "It's the fact that it continues, that it grows. Nothing happens in a vacuum, and it continues to build on what has come before to create what will be. It is the safest way of telling the future without magic."

"Really?" Harry was surprised. He had never thought of history as a part of divination. Could it really be that simple? To know what was to come, just look to the past? "Could you tell me what will happen to me?" He asked, suddenly curious if Danielle's ideas would pan out.

"You are viewed as the personal savior of the wizarding world, yes?" She asked without any hint of awe in her voice. For her, it was a theoretical exercise and nothing more. Her attitude put Harry at ease and he found himself telling her everything that had happened to him over the years (heavily edited, of course) in response to specific questions.

Her forehead knitted as she thought over everything he told her. "It's difficult to be sure. I can see three or four ways your situation could play out, and I don't wish to distress you." She said. "Saviors never have really happy endings, you know." She said softly.

"I've caught that idea a time or two," He adjusted as the music changed and they relaxed into the waltz. "Is there any hope for me?"

"Look at all of the supposed saviors in history." She said. "Saviors traditionally rescue someone or something from a threat. The list is varied and from different backgrounds. Muhammed the Prophet, Augustus Caesar, Constantine, Martin Luther, Napoleon Bonaparte,

Stalin, Justinian, Christ, Alexander the Great, Sun Wen Ti...the list goes on and on. One group or another at some point in time considered each one a savior, a person that contributes something to a society to save it, so to speak. Some go on and live out their lives, but more often than not, there is not a happy conclusion. They inevitably change the world. Sometimes for the better; sometimes for the worse. Either way, change happens, just like it did before."

"Are you saying that I am doomed to change the world?" Harry asked, a smile breaking out across his face.

"Without a doubt, so long as you take care of yourself. People will listen if you are as important as Uncle Vlad tells me you are." She said. "I think I'm ready for a little refreshment. Would you care to join me?" She asked.

"I could use a little something to drink. What time is dinner going to be served?" he asked. His stomach was starting to make its displeasure known.

"Uncle Vlad usually lets us dance for an hour and a quarter before the meal is served and then after that, more dancing, then coffee and some little tidbits, and we usually end about three or four in the morning." She explained as she led the way to the punch bowls at one end of the ballroom.

"He expects me to dance that long?" Harry asked in astonishment.

"No. If you get tired, you can always go into one of the sitting rooms. The men tend to gather in one, and the women in the other. There are light refreshments in each room, card games, and other quiet amusements. This is a party, but not everyone cares for dancing. I don't blame you in not wanting to dance all night. You should try it in heels."

"Er, I think not. You are a far stronger person than I, Danielle. My hat goes off to you and your suffering feet." He told her in the most serious voice he could muster. His statement seemed to please her and she offered to point out various people while they finished their

refreshments. He heard all kinds of gossip about the crowd that filled the room. Some were vampires, and Harry couldn't believe that the rest of the regular people did not notice that there were a few vampires roaming about. Some were wizards, and Danielle's knowledge of the magical communities was astonishing.

"That one is affiliated with that Dark Lord your country is so concerned over," Danielle's voice said in a soft voice, close to his ear. Harry's head shot up and his gaze followed Danielle's direction. There stood the Order of the Phoenix's former spy, William Zareh, trapped in conversation with a rather aggressive woman. Harry felt the corners of his lips turn up at the thought of Zareh dealing with a woman. It didn't seem possible, but then again, teachers always had that mystique of not having a life outside the school building.

"Please excuse me, Danielle, but he was one of my teachers. I think I'd like to go and say hello." Harry told her.

"Of course. I'll be ready for another turn around the dance floor in a few minutes. Remember, you're under Uncle Vlad's protection, so that man can't hurt you while he's here."

"I remember, but he won't hurt me. I know it." Harry said as he took his leave of Danielle. Danielle only shrugged and went off to find someone for a gossip while Harry made his way across the room to come up to Zareh's side.

"Hello, Professor Zareh," Harry said.

"Mr. Potter!" The man seemed genuinely happy to see him. Harry smiled as the man shook his hand. "You are looking a thousand times better than the last time I saw you." He looked Harry over again and shook his head. "I don't know what they do for you at that other school of yours, but I do have to say that I like the results."

"Good, clean living." Harry said lightly. "And lots of junk food. You are not looking bad yourself. Not being a spy anymore must agree with you." Harry had lowered his voice as he said the last part and was gratified to see Zareh pale the slightest bit.

“How in the world did you know about that?” Zareh asked, his voice slightly panicked.

“I have many contacts in the wizarding world, Professor Zareh. Don’t worry. I know many secrets, and yours is safe with me.” Harry said in an undertone.

“Thank you.” Zareh said in a grudging sort of way. “Are you enjoying your summer holiday, Mr. Potter?”

“Yes, I am. Vlad is quite a good host, and between the two vampires, I may very well end up spoiled beyond all redemption.”

“ Somehow, I can’t see that happening.” Zareh told him. “I understand this is your birthday party...many happy returns.”

“Thank you. My birthday is not for another four days, but I have learned that challenging Dracula is never an easy thing to do.” Harry smiled as Zareh gave him an understanding look and the two shared a laugh.

“I understand all too well. Khalid likes to rummage in my closet and replace things without my knowledge.”

“I think that’s a universal vampire trait.” Harry said after a moment’s thought. “Vlad has started replacing certain articles of my wardrobe, and I really hope he’ll stop in a little while. I actually like a lot of the things my aunt has picked out for me.”

“Give up hope now, Mr. Potter. It won’t happen.” Zareh told him. Harry smiled and asked how things were going at Hogwarts and whether the man was returning as Defense professor. The whole while, Harry was hiding his construction of his illusion. It was time to allow the Dark Lord’s student and Harry Potter seen in the same place. He focused a little more and made the illusion appear behind them as he ended the conversation with Zareh and moved away.

“He is a very nice person, isn’t he, William?” Tom asked as he materialized beside the man.

“Tom!” Zareh clutched at his heart and took a breath. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“There’s a great deal you don’t know about me, William,” Tom’s image said as he moved up to the man’s side. “Then again, there’s a great deal you don’t know about a lot of things, so I suppose I shouldn’t be concerned overmuch with what you do and do not know.”

“May I ask what you are doing here, Tom?” Zareh asked, trying to still his racing heart.

“Oh, the same thing everyone else is doing, I imagine. Dance a little dance, eat a little cake, and wish the Boy-Who-Lived congratulations for making it another year on this earth. That sort of thing.” Tom paused before a grin manifested on his face. “It is amazing that he has managed another year, hasn’t it? I mean, with the Dark Lord and all.”

“Quite amazing.” Zareh agreed. “Have you given any thought to our offers?” Zareh turned fully towards the boy and found himself surprised. It seemed the lad had grown a bit, and started filling out. Even the outfit spoke of a care he’d not seen on the boy before. He’d changed, and Zareh couldn’t find anything wrong with that idea.

“The Order couldn’t keep the Potter boy safe from his own Muggle uncle; how in the world can they keep me safe from a lunatic madman bent on world domination?” Tom’s voice drawled as he studied the dancers in front of them. “Honestly, William, you’re a little naïve.”

“I am not naïve. I just know that you’ll be better off away from the Dark Lord than you are close to him.” Zareh explained, one hand coming out to rest on Tom’s shoulder.

“Really?” Tom’s voice loaded that one word with a million overtones, everything from mocking to disbelief. “I find that hard to believe. It was good seeing you again, William. Please take care of yourself. The Dark Lord does not take kindly to traitors and spies. I’d hate to see you killed for being an idiot.” Tom moved away and disappeared before Zareh could follow him.

That boy will be the death of me, I swear it. Why doesn’t he trust the Order? He’s almost as bad as the Potter boy!

Harry chuckled to himself as he moved away from Zareh and went in search of Danielle. She had to be here somewhere, and he was determined to have her next to him for a while. The Italian Great Grandmama had found him again and he had made his escape by saying that he saw Danielle looking for him. He had a feeling the grandmother would find him again if Danielle did not appear. He had just slipped behind a rather stout gentleman and was prepared to wait for the better part of an hour if it would save him from the Italian Great Grandmama when he heard Dracula calling him. He stood up straight and saw the vampire coming straight towards him.

“Ah, Harry! There you are!” Vlad said as he came up, a man trailing behind him. “There is someone I want you to meet.” Vlad gestured the man closer. Harry took a moment to study him. He was older, a little bumbly, and obviously nervous. “Minister Lewandowski, this is a very good friend of mine, Mr. Harry Potter. Harry, this is Minister Lewandowski, the newly elected head of the Polish Magical Cooperative.”

“It is nice to meet you, Minister Lewandowski. Your work must be extremely interesting.” Harry said as they shook hands.

“It is at that, Mr. Potter. It is an honor to meet you. I have heard much about the Boy Who Lived, and nice to see so many vicious rumors dispelled.”

“Ah, thank you,” Harry said softly. Exactly how does one respond to that?

“Lord Dracula was telling me of your ambitions. We must talk more about those reforms you would like to start.”

“Of course,” Harry said. “I would enjoy that.” He sent a desperate thought to Vlad. I have reforms and ambitions?

Naturally. Just go along for now and let Uncle Vlad arrange everything.

“I will have my secretary contact yours.” Minister Lewandowski said. “And now, I’ll leave you to enjoy your birthday party. Many happy returns.”

“Thank you.” Harry told him. Minister Lewandowski moved away with a definite spring in his step.

“What are you plotting, dear Uncle Vlad?” Harry asked under his breath.

“Nothing you need worry your already busy mind over, my little magus.” Vlad said. “Now, where did your partner go?”

Danielle appeared not a second after Vlad’s question (and Harry was sure it was some sort of trick) with a bright smile on her face.

“Harry, you must come and meet the French Minister. Mon Dieu, he is a wonderful man.” Danielle dragged Harry away from Vlad and towards a rather thin and slightly familiar man.

“Ah, Danielle, my angel. You found him!” Minister Devereaux paused long enough to bow over Danielle’s hand before turning to Harry. Harry recognized him from the short incarceration at Hogwarts. The man had been at an Order meeting in the Great Hall.

“Mr. Potter, I wish you a very happy birthday. I do not think you remember me...”

“Of course I do, Minister Devereaux. It is nice to see you again.” Harry said as he shook the man’s hand.

“Ah, you do remember me!” The minister seemed genuinely delighted. “May I borrow you a moment? Danielle, chere, surely you won’t mind his brief absence?”

“Of course not,” Danielle said, waving them away. “Uncle Vlad wants to dance with me now. Go on.”

Minister Devereaux and Harry bowed as she moved away and Harry found all of those manners that Vlad had insisted he learn were useful. The minister motioned for Harry to follow him to what Vlad called the men’s salon. He picked up two glasses of champagne and handed one to Harry before removing them to the far corner.

“Mr. Potter, I have a great many things to tell you, but few of them can be said in a polite or diplomatic dance of words. Moreover, I’m afraid that people may mistake my meaning if I did not use the plainest of words.” He said in a low voice.

“By all means, Minister Devereaux, speak plainly,” Harry said. “You won’t offend me.”

“I may, and I do not wish to do so, but I may not be able to avoid offending you.” Devereaux warned him. “It all depends on your current situation and outlook on the world. When we first met at the Order meeting, and please correct me if I am wrong, but I received the impression that you were not exactly...happy in Albus Dumbledore’s care.”

Harry took a sip of champagne as he thought of his answer. “It was not the place I wanted to be at that moment.” Harry admitted. “What of it?”

“Mr. Potter, my government has noticed a very startling trend in the English government of the last fifty years. Too long has Albus Dumbledore had so much control over things in England. The English

Minister of Magic allows the man to make decisions for him, and there is just too much of his influence. We hope to see it end.”

I’m sorry, Minister Devereaux, but I fail to see what Albus Dumbledore has to do with me.” Harry said patiently.

“Lord Dracula told me you were modest, but I did not understand the level.” Minister Devereaux said. “You are very much a figurehead for the wizarding world in England, particularly among the younger generation. You are a figurehead for them, a beacon of hope. My country is looking for change, and we think that you are that change coming onto the horizon.”

Harry stared at the man with his face in a frozen mask of polite puzzlement, but inside he was screaming. He didn’t want this. He wanted to fade into the background, not be some beacon of hope or whatever the man said he was to the younger generation.

“I assure you, Minister, that my influence is not as large as you think on the English magical society.” Harry told him. “I am just a small part of it all.”

“Again, Mr. Potter, you underestimate your power. I can see that you have yet to experience your true influence, but I will leave that for now. I do wish to tell you that my government supports you, now and in the future. We hope to welcome you as a friend to the French people, and a confidant to our own magical community.”

“Thank you, Minister Devereaux. I am flattered and I hope to fulfill any role you say I may have to your government.” Harry wanted to fade into the background and disappear. He didn’t want this at all. He wasn’t what this man thought he was.

Minister Devereaux left Harry a few minutes later, asking him to think things over and offering a card with his contact information. Since when was I a political figure? Harry asked himself as he pocketed the card.

“Harry!” Dracula said as he poked his head into the salon. “It is time for dinner! Did you not hear the gong? Really, now, let’s not keep everyone waiting for us.”

Harry snapped out of his contemplation and frowned. “What have you been telling everyone, Vlad? Why does everyone seem to think that I am some sort of political candidate?”

“I?” Dracula’s voice was full of incredulity. “I have done nothing except confirm a few rumors that I was a friend to you. That is all, little magus.” Vlad wrapped an arm around Harry’s shoulders and squeezed. “You laid the framework long ago by not taking sides. Now, everyone is hoping that you will pick his side. Nothing wrong with that.”

Harry decided that he wasn’t going to argue with the vampire. If he tried, the vampire might decide that Harry was looking tasty. Not a good way to go, especially since his Aunt Petunia would most likely be upset at the shattering of the perfect gentleman vampire image she had of Dracula. Harry knew better.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU!” The crowd finished the song and Harry felt as though he was in the middle of a very scary dream with fire included. Well, the fire was on his birthday cake...his and Dudley’s, of course. The combined weight of thirty-four candles on a four layer cake was enough to make him wonder if there was a fire marshal in the ballroom. Surely, this was illegal or dangerous for everyone in the room?

“Now make a wish.” Dracula told the two of them in a whisper. Harry felt his jaw clench. A wish? For it all to be finished. Harry blew out his candles to thunderous applause. He smirked at Dudley’s face. He probably wished something about him and Polina. Typical teenager. Lucky him.

Dracula led Harry away from the cake for more introductions to Very Important People. He met the magical prime minister from China and even though he spoke to him for almost ten minutes, he still couldn’t hope to pronounce the man’s name. The closest approximation he

could produce was Mr. Long, and Mr. Long seemed to accept that with good grace. He received an invitation to visit the magical government of China, still under the rule of an emperor. The emperor had heard of Harry, and had “pestered” Mr. Long, his prime minister, to wish the Boy-Who-Lived a happy birthday and extend an invitation for a visit.

As the evening passed, Harry received more invitations from all over the world. It seemed that every country wanted a visit from Harry Potter. He finally succumbed and dragged Remus along with him as he met the people Dracula insisted upon, allowing the older man to keep track of the names, countries, and invitations.

“Must I meet absolutely everyone?” Harry said in a whisper he knew Dracula would hear.

“No, not everyone,” The vampire replied close to Harry’s ear. “Just the ones I feel you need to meet. Things are happening, little magus. Many interesting things.”

“If I find out that you are doing this for your sole amusement, Vlad, I shall be very upset with you.”

“You would ruin my fun?” Vlad asked with a snicker. “No, no. I assure you, Harry, all of this is very necessary. Please, just humor an old vampire.” Vlad gave Harry’s shoulders a squeeze as he directed Harry out of the ballroom and towards another room tucked away from the other salons. Vlad motioned Harry into the room and followed, firmly shutting the door and locking it. Harry paused only a few steps into the room. There was a group of people waiting at the other end. This group caused Harry to falter the slightest bit. This was a group of vampires, and Harry had a feeling that they were indeed necessary.

As they approached, every vampire made a gesture that Vlad returned. Harry suspected it was a salute of some sort, but he played dumb. Let the vampires keep their secrets. He’d rather not know and be safe in his ignorance. After all, vampires were one of those groups you joined for life...or for eternity.

“Lord Dracula,” the group murmured as the pair approached. One woman stepped forward and offered her hand to Dracula. The strange thing Harry noticed was that she offered it wrist up. Dracula smiled, took her hand, and turned it over to drop a kiss on the back of it. Harry followed Dracula’s example and then stood, feeling little butterflies of nerves in his stomach. He calmed by taking a deep breath.

“This is the boy?” One of the vampires asked in a bored tone. He appeared young, but Harry had a feeling he was ancient, as old as Dracula, perhaps. His features were hard to place in terms of nationality, but Harry had little doubt that this man was successful at passing himself off as nothing more than a beautiful man. Dark hair curled down over his shoulders while brown eyes blinked drowsily. He felt Harry’s eyes on him and turned to lock gazes with him. Harry felt a frisson of shock and he had to fight the urge to hide behind Dracula. This vampire was dangerous, and Harry knew it, instinctively.

“He is,” Vlad’s voice said, and Harry felt himself relax. He was under Vlad’s protection this evening. He was safe.

“Not as safe as you might think, child.” The man said as he rose in a fluid motion. Harry threw up his Occlumency shields and waited. As one, the group winced. “Must you?”

“Cassius, this is Harry Potter. Harry Potter, Cassius.” The vampire offered his hand and Harry took it. The vampire allowed the clasp for a mere second before stepping back away from Harry.

“You are insane, Vlad.” Cassius said. “Absolutely insane.”

Dracula ignored Cassius’s statement and gestured forward another vampire. Harry had no doubts as to her origin. She was dark haired, dark eyed, and dark skinned. Perhaps somewhere from the Middle East? Either way, she was beautiful and Harry had the feeling that that was how she survived, attracting young men that lost all of their common sense when faced with her beauty. Harry was in danger of the same thing.

“ Parmida, Harry Potter. Harry Potter, Parmida.” Again, the handshake lasted a second before Parmida stepped away. Harry was beginning to become concerned. Why were all of them acting as if he had something contagious?

Another vampire stepped forward and offered his hand. This one was as fair as Parmida was dark. “Bohdan, Harry Potter. Harry Potter, Bohdan.” Harry took the man’s hand and was surprised when the man lasted almost a full ten seconds before releasing Harry’s hand.

An older vampire came forward. She was older in appearance, at any rate, a woman of forty, perhaps. She reminded Harry of McGonagall as her no-nonsense mouth spread in a smile as she took Harry’s hand. “Neith, Harry Potter. Harry Potter, Neith.”

“I wish to read his future, Vlad.” She said calmly as she took Harry’s hand and held it. “If you would approve.”

Not another prophecy! Harry wanted to wail, but Vlad only placed a hand on his shoulder. “Harry?”

“What does that entail?” He asked, amazed that she still held his hand. It must be thirty seconds by now. It was a record.

“A drop of blood. Your palm. My eyes.” She shrugged and Harry considered the idea.

“Do I have to know what you see?” He asked.

“Not if you do not wish to know.” She answered, stroking his palm. Harry sent a questioning thought towards Vlad. The vampire squeezed his shoulder again, giving his agreement.

“Alright.” He said calmly. How bad could this be? He saw a drop of blood appear on his wrist, even though he could not see the cut made. The drop travelled down to his palm and he saw that Neith was saying something, but her lips were moving too fast for Harry to catch anything. All at once, he felt his body pitched backwards and the

space behind his eyes went fuzzy. He tried to pull away, but nothing happened.

“Lower your shields.” Cassius said from his right. Harry’s head rolled and met the vampire’s eyes. “The vertigo is due to your shields. Lower them.” Harry fought the sick feeling in his stomach as he tried to keep his body upright and to avoid disgracing himself in front of all of these vampires. This was unlike anything he had ever felt, and he was scared. Gut-wrenching fear ate at him. The other vampires gathered around him and he felt their support. Vlad’s arms wrapped around him, holding him in place. “Lower your shields!”

Harry lowered his shields and the vertigo was replaced with a languid glow in his entire body. Vlad caught his sagging body and held him, smoothing a hand over his hair. His eyes shut and he allowed himself to be held, allowed the vampire to support him. Neith dropped his hand and stepped away. Harry’s eyes slid shut as he saw her smile at him.

When his eyes opened again, he was on a couch and surrounded by vampires. Their stances were completely different. They were open and friendly. More than one hand touched him. One held his hand, another petted his hair. Another stroked his arm. “What?” Harry managed.

“Your future was difficult to see.” Neith said, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “I forgot to tell you to lower your shields. I apologize for your discomfort.” She said.

“Salright.” He told her. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Side effect, I’m afraid.” Vlad said, his voice far too cheery for Harry’s taste. “It’ll pass.”

Harry grumbled and all of the vampires laughed. It was good to see Harry be the child he was, no matter how many years he actually had to his name.

“Harry, I have a rather serious question for you.” Vlad said, pulling Harry onto his lap. Harry struggled for a minute before he gave up. The vampire would just do what he wanted, with or without Harry’s approval. One of the vampires held out a glass to Harry and he took it. How had Cassius known Harry was thirsty? He sipped at the champagne and then lowered it, wondering what Vlad wanted to ask him. “We all were talking while you were resting (had the vampire said “napping” Harry never would have forgiven him), and we thought this might be the best thing. May I adopt you?”

“Adopt me?” Harry asked, confusion settling in. “What do you mean?”

“I would claim you as my own, nothing more. You would still live with your family. I would just be your...well, godfather, so to speak, and Khalid your loveable older brother. A permanent protection, Harry, and one I gladly give.”

“Is there anything more to that?” Harry felt someone take the glass from his hand.

“No responsibility on your part, really. I’m sure you won’t mind visiting here from time to time, right?”

“Not at all.” Harry said. “I’ve enjoyed my visit here.

“Good, good. I will visit you in England, and you here. Other than that, there will be nothing I require from you.” Vlad explained. “I will have a bit more authority should anyone question our relationship. It may come in handy later.”

“I really don’t want to know my future, Vlad.” Harry told him.

“We won’t tell you.” Cassius told him. “I can warn you that after you are adopted, we all become your uncles and aunties. Expect spoiling.”

“I’m in very grave danger of being spoiled.” Harry grumbled.

“Yes, you are, my little magus.” Vlad reached up and tapped Harry’s nose. “So, I may adopt you?”

“Have you asked my aunt?” Harry asked.

“Yes, and while she does not understand what it all entails, she agreed to any protection I may offer you.” Vlad told him.

Harry thought it over for a minute or two before nodding. “I agree.” Harry said calmly. If his aunt said it was alright, who was he to argue with her?

Harry jumped as he felt his collars undone and pushed away from his neck. Terror spiked through him. “Vlad, what are you doing?” he gasped.

“I only need bite you to claim you.” The vampire explained as he shifted Harry in his arms. “You will not be turned, or a vampire. It will only hurt for an instant, I promise.” He said. “You already agreed.”

Harry felt a spike of pain at his neck and he thrashed in Vlad’s arms. As Vlad had promised, the pain only lasted a second before it faded. This was...nice. Harry relaxed and sighed, allowing Vlad to finish. He had no bones left in his body a minute later. A thought drifted across his mind. If this is what vampire prey was subjected to as they died, then vampires really were the best predators alive.

Vlad pulled away and held Harry, hugging him close and crooning to him. Harry smiled and closed his eyes. He felt wonderful. That could be addicting if he let it.

“Mine.” Vlad said harshly as he healed Harry’s neck. Harry only nodded and smiled again. He was...spacey. Loopy. Something...

“Yours. Now let him breathe, Vlad.”

Oh, oxygen deprived. Vlad’s arms loosened and Harry felt some of his loopiness dissipate as oxygen entered his lungs.

“How do you feel, Harry?” Parmida asked.

“Different.” He said. “Relaxed.”

“It is the same all the time.” She explained. “Do you think you can stand?”

Harry considered the question before attempting it. Vlad’s arms wrapped around him and held him in place. “I don’t think Vlad will let me.” He explained to her.

“Vlad will be possessive for a day or so.” She said with a laugh. “You’ll have to share him sometime, brother.”

“No, I don’t. He’s mine.” Vlad nuzzled Harry and Harry could only roll his eyes. Why were undead creatures so willing to be affectionate towards the ones they wanted to protect?

“You’ll have to explain to Lucian how my hair achieved this state.” He told Vlad. Lucian was rabid when it came to Harry’s appearance, especially this evening.

“Mine.” Vlad said again. “I suppose we should go rejoin the party, hmm, little magus.”

“That might be best.” Harry told him. “After all, you were the one that decided this was a good idea. I was happy with a cake and some ice cream. You wanted a ball.”

“And why shouldn’t I give you one? Hmm?” Vlad allowed Harry to stand and Harry only snickered as the vampires all attempted to fix Harry’s appearance.

“I can do it.” He told them, using a touch of magic to soothe his wild hair and remove the wrinkles from his clothing. “Shall we return to the party?”

“If we must,” Vlad said, clearly unhappy about the idea. “I don’t get to spend any time with my new child.” Vlad pouted.

Danielle poked her head into the room. “There you all are!” She said sharply as she saw them. “Dancing, now!” She ordered.

Harry only grinned before giving Dracula a wink. “The lady’s command is my wish.” He told the vampire before disappearing.

“Isn’t the saying ‘The lady’s wish is my command’?” Cassius asked as Harry slipped through the door and back to the ballroom.

“I think he meant it exactly the way he said it.” Vlad told him, a smirk across his lips.

“You found a charming little boy, Vlad.”

“Yes...I wish he would teach me some of his tricks.”

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